N. Vijaylakshmi Brara

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Politics, Society and Cosmology in India's North East

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N. Vijaylakshmi Brara

DELHI
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
CALCUTTA CHENNAI MUMBAI
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Folklore, Society and Cosmology

in India's North East

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Oxford University Press, Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford New York
Athens Auckland Bangkok Calcutta
Cape Town Chennai Dar es Salaam Delhi
Florence Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City
Mumbai Nairobi Paris Singapore
Taipei Tokyo Toronto

and associates in
Berlin Ibadan

© Oxford University Press 1998

ISBN 0 19 564331 3

Typeset by S.J.I. Services, New Delhi 110024
Printed in India at Pauls Press, New Delhi 110020
and published by Manzar Khan, Oxford University Press
YMCA Library Building, Jai Singh Road, New Delhi 110001

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Preface

The methodology underlying anthropological fieldwork has undergone great change over time. In the days of Evans Pritchard, Malinowski, *et al.* it involved the study of 'primitive', non-western culture by anthropologists from a western perspective. Terms like 'savage', 'primitive', 'indic', 'exotic' and 'magical' were commonly used to describe such societies, and the degree of 'primitiveness' was measured by the absence of those structures which defined modernity in their own (western) societies.

Times have changed. There is hardly any society now which is 'closed'. Education has spread far and wide, and people in the so-called 'primitive' societies now respond to and are aware of outside influences. Field workers of my generation have to be aware of this change. Even while opening up more and more to the outside world, these societies are returning to their roots, their culture and their belief systems, informed by an understanding that such a return to the past could help preserve the identity of their communities that are constantly being threatened by the inroads made by more dominant cultures. Reviving past glory and returning to the past is also part of the attempt to escape the modern-day ills of society, and of faith and hope that the past could show the way to a solution of today's problems. This explains the resurgence of interest in the past. This is an interest particularly prominent among indigenous societies all over the world. One such society is that of Manipur.

The fact that in Manipur certain traditions have survived through the ages and are still vibrant, has instilled among Manipuris, a feeling of pride in their culture. This pride makes the people of Manipur very emotional and sentimental about the pressures that their culture faces.

Given this context, fieldwork in Manipur requires great sensitivity.

The people of Manipur have witnessed many conquests of their society over time. Hinduism invaded Manipur around the fifteenth century but established a stronghold in the state only in the eighteenth century. Christianity which crept in with the British invasion got firmly entrenched in the hills after displacing the traditional beliefs, rites and rituals of the hill-people. The British had brought along with them their own administrators, who were unable to win the confidence of the people. And this distrust of the alien did not change even with Indian independence, as the Indian government too, failed in gaining the respect and confidence of these people. All the three structures of religion, colonialism, and the broad Indian political framework were impositions from above. And all of the three structures failed to get assimilated with the Manipuri world-view. However, these very impositions also inspired a return to roots to safeguard Manipuri culture from such 'corrupting' influences.

So, today, even as Manipuris adopt 'modern' lifestyles, they simultaneously maintain a deep-rooted faith in their tradition.

This study has tried to consider and record the composite nature of the Manipuri social matrix. The objective of this study is to introduce Manipuri society from an anthropological perspective. The scope of this study is so vast that every sub-section of each chapter of this book can be developed into a whole new area of research. I hope that this book will encourage researchers to study Manipur and provide new insights and new perspectives for the understanding of cultural constructs.

I would like to thank all the people who helped, encouraged and advised me, without whose assistance this work would not have been possible.

I want to thank Professor R.K. Jain of Jawaharlal Nehru University who guided me at every step of my research.

Y.P. Chhibbar has been a constant source of inspiration and guidance from early days. He read my drafts keeping awake for nights.

Rajesh Salam, my interpreter as well as informer, who braved the sun and rains to help me with fieldwork was a valuable support.

Arambam Lokendra's help on the field, his discussions on the intrinsic aspects of Manipuri society and his willingness to come with me to meet people in spite of his busy schedule makes me feel extremely grateful to him.

R.K. Hiranya, Padmashree N. Khelchandra, Professor Ch. Budhi Singh, Ch. Manihar, Professor M.K. Priyobrata, Professor Gangumai

Kamei, Professor M. Horam and Professor Lal Bahadur Varma all gave me a patient hearing and enriched me with their knowledge of Manipuri society as also with their academic insights. Dr N. Pramodini provided useful information on kinship systems. Kh. Ratan translated the detailed procedure of 'Lai-Haraoba' from Manipuri to English.

Sehjo Singh, Lalfakpuii Fanai, Songkhupchung Serto and N. Sukajit were all a constant source of encouragement.

N. Kotiswar, my husband, went through the drafts in detail. He brought to my notice some facts of Manipuri society, which I had overlooked. He was a ready reference for information about Manipur. His suggestions have gone a long way in bringing this book to its present form.

Devendro and Netrajit helped me in drawing the sketches, as well as in the tedious procedure of taking out draft print outs.

R.K. Sadananda made his fax facility readily available to me, helping speedy comunication.

To all these people I am extremely thankful.

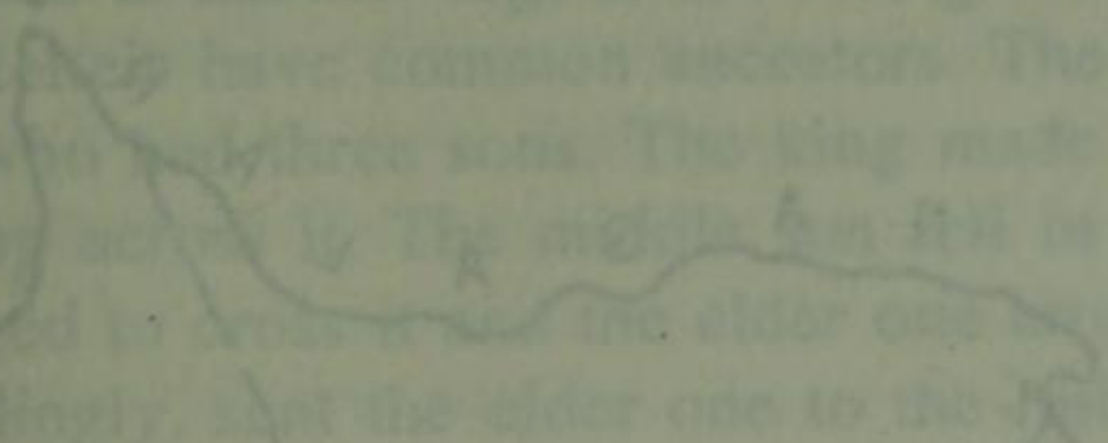
I am also very thankful to Ashok of the State Kala Academy and Mutua Bahadur of Mutua Museum. Mutua Bahadur gave me a lot of material on the cultural aspects of Manipuri society and showed me his personal artifacts with great patience. Authorities of Manipur State Museum, Manipur University Museum, Manipur University Library and Jawaharlal Nehru University Library provided me all the materials that I required for my work. The Department of Archaeology, Manipur, made it possible for me to enter the old Kangla site, which has been a prohibited area for the public since the Assam Rifles, a para-military force is stationed there. I am grateful for their help.

To all the people with whom I interacted in my field, including Khongman Ima and Pundit Achouba, I remain indebted.

My parents in Delhi kept in touch on the phone and enquired regularly about my work.

Last, but not at all the least, I am extremely grateful to my daughter, Vasundhara, who in spite of being just one year old gave me enough time to enable the completion of this book.

Vijaylakshmi



Introduction

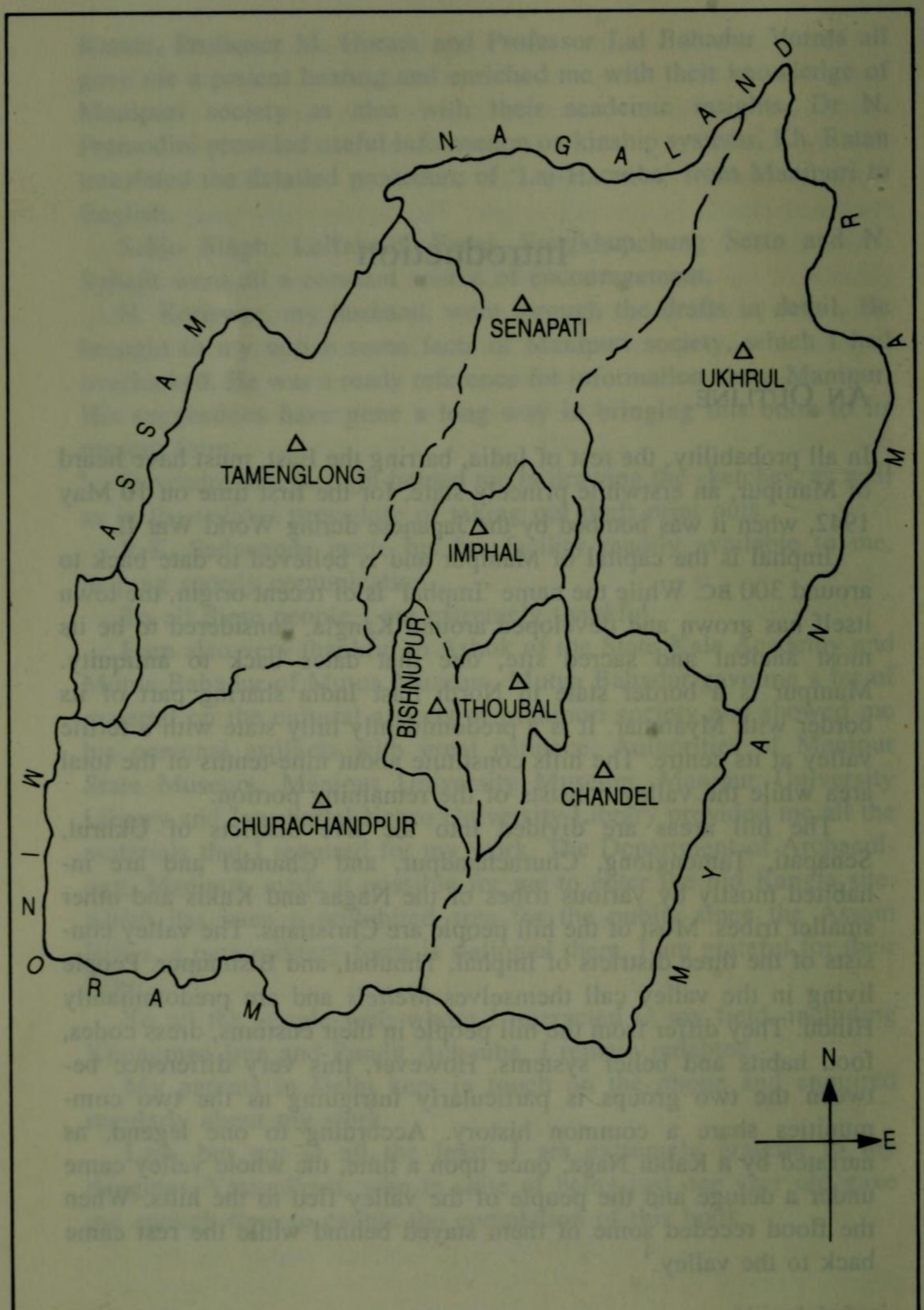
An Outline

In all probability, the rest of India, barring the East, must have heard of Manipur, an erstwhile princely state, for the first time on 10 May 1942, when it was bombed by the Japanese during World War II.

Imphal is the capital of Manipur and is believed to date back to around 300 BC. While the name 'Imphal' is of recent origin, the town itself has grown and developed around Kangla, considered to be its most ancient and sacred site, one that dates back to antiquity. Manipur is a border state in North East India sharing part of its border with Myanmar. It is a predominantly hilly state with a fertile valley at its centre. The hills constitute about nine-tenths of the total area while the valley consists of the remaining portion.

The hill areas are divided into the five districts of Ukhrul, Senapati, Tamenglong, Churachandpur, and Chandel and are inhabited mostly by various tribes of the Nagas and Kukis and other smaller tribes. Most of the hill people are Christians. The valley consists of the three districts of Imphal, Thoubal, and Bishnupur. People living in the valley call themselves *Meiteis* and are predominantly Hindu. They differ from the hill people in their customs, dress codes, food habits and belief systems. However, this very difference between the two groups is particularly intriguing as the two communities share a common history. According to one legend, as narrated by a Kabui Naga, once upon a time, the whole valley came under a deluge and the people of the valley fled to the hills. When the flood receded some of them stayed behind while the rest came back to the valley.[1]

[1] There is geographical evidence that the Imphal valley was under water at one time.



Map of Manipur

There is another legend according to which the Tangkhul Nagas and Meiteis have common ancestors. The legend tells the story of a king who had three sons. The king made a trench and told his sons to jump across it. The middle son fell in it, the younger one barely managed to cross it and the elder one crossed it with ease. The king accordingly, sent the elder one to the hills, since he was capable of handling tough tasks, the middle one was sent to the foothills, while the third was told to handle the tasks in the valley. This particular legend has another version that tells of two brothers who lived in the hills. The younger one while galloping down on his horse saw the valley, liked the place, and stayed on while the elder brother remained in the hills. Apart from the legends, there is also some historical evidence to support the close ties/links between the Meiteis (plains people) and the hill people.[2]

During coronation ceremonies the Meitei kings and queens wore Naga dresses and ornaments. There are numerous instances where the Meitei kings married women from the hills. The structure of the royal palace also reflects Naga architecture. There are gods and goddesses, and deified fighters, that are commonly recognized by both the hill people (especially the Nagas) and the Meiteis.

The 'Mangangs' are one of the tribes/clans that originally settled in the plains. The Angom, Moirang, Khaba-Nganba, Luwang, Chenglei, and Khuman were the names of the other tribes/clans that inhabited the plains. Together they formed the seven clans of the subsequently integrated Meitei society. After a series of inter-tribal conflicts the Mangangs established control over these tribes, as well as over the other hill tribes, and by gaining political supremacy, also established cultural and racial supremacy. The conquered tribes/clans were subsumed under the name 'Meitei' and reduced to the status of clans. This surrender of identity was so complete that these other clans began tracing their ancestry from the same source as the Mangangs. From a status of independent kingdoms they became part of the Meitei family.[3] The hill-people, on the other hand, were living in a difficult terrain with a scattered and sparse population. Most of

[2] According to T.C. Hudson, '... two hundred years ago, in internal organization, in religion, in habits, and manners, the Meitheis were as the hill people are. The successive waves of invasion by the Shan, Burmese, the Chinese, and the Hindus have left permanent marks on the civilization of the people' (T.C. Hudson, *The Meitheis*, Low Price Publications, Delhi, 1989, p.11).

[3] For further details see Chapter 6.

the hill tribes consisted of a few households each having a different dialect with very little interaction with one another. They remained by and large isolated entities, evolving their own isolated cultural constructs with no well-developed state structure thus acquiring a peripheral status in relation to the Meiteis.

While there is evidence of the way in which the different clans came under the siege of the Mangangs and were assigned the common term Meiteis, there is no record of such exercise of sovereignty by the Meitei kings over the hill people. It seems that a complete overthrow of the authority of the hill people's chief did not happen though the hill people recognized the Meiteis as more powerful. The Meitei kings from time to time extracted tribute from the hill tribes. But, according to one scholar, the Meitei kings had no superior power over the tribals. When the Meitei kings visited the hills they were treated like the chief's guests. There is historical evidence in *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, the royal chronicle, that records the inclusion of many hill people in the army of Meitei kings that fought against the Shan dynasties of Burma, the British, and other outside forces.

The Meitei kings from early times had been mobile and interactive with other regions. War as well as trade had been a consistent feature of their relations with Burma. The mythical animals called Kangla Sha which became royal symbols were believed to have been built by the Chinese. Sericulture, and the brick-making techniques were also believed to have been brought by the Chinese.

In the post Hindu era, Manipur came in closer contact with the Ahom kingdom of Assam and other neighbouring kingdoms of Tripura, Cooch-Bihar, Sylhet etc. Matrimonial and military alliances were forged with them. Hinduism had a significant impact on Meitei society.

These kinds of interactions enabled Meitei society to develop its unique state apparatus, enrich its economy and widen the field of cultural contact.

The people of the hills by contrast, due to the hostile nature of their terrain were not able to have similar interactions with other societies.

In the course of time, two dissimilar societies emerged, a homogeneous and complex Meitei society, and on the other hand various heterogeneous, scattered tribal societies. These two groups were further alienated when Hindu Vaishnavism invaded Manipur during the reign of King Charairongba, in the seventeenth century and made Meiteis part of the pan-Vaishnav culture. This alienation

was further aggravated when the hill people adopted Christianity in the early part of the nineteenth century, while orthodox Hinduism was firmly entrenched in Meitei society. It may be relevant to mention here that with the advent of Christianity, the traditional belief systems, that had provided the hill people with a link, albeit tenuous, with Meitei society, ended. The new religion discouraged the hill people from observing their traditional ceremonies and festivals as they were considered by the preachers of Christianity to be 'paganistic and primitive'. The rich culture and traditions of the hill people became relics of the past. Their role in shaping the present and future of the people were denied. Though it did not pose any challenge to the dominant Meitei society, the latter refused to acknowledge the new and alien religion. The 'new' way of life of the Christian hill people was ignored by the dominant Meitei society. Thus a big chasm was created between the hill and valley people.

The present study has largely been confined to the history and culture of the Meiteis. Whilst recognizing the existence and importance of the history and culture of the hill people, and that a thorough study of this is overdue, it must be said that to study the hill people is more difficult due to the paucity of authentic historical accounts. Apart from some accounts by a few colonial agents there has been very little work at the macro level about the hill people.

Being a student of sociology I have attempted to study this society by observing peoples' perception of their own history and society. The present study is not a study of the history of Manipur as a whole but an attempt to study the culture of Meitei society in a historical perspective. While dealing with history I have not relied merely on the 'text book' history but also on people's perception of history.

The popular ethno-historical account is as follows. Small kingdoms, ruled by clan/tribal dynasties were gradually absorbed into Meitei society ruled by the Mangang clan, which later on came to be known as Ningthouja. The Khaba Nganba, the Angom, and the Ningthouja had their capitals in the heart of the valley. The Khumans had their territory to the south of the valley, the Moirangs in the south-west, the Luwangs in the north-west and Chengleis in the middle surrounded on all sides by those of the Khumans, Moirang, the Luwangs, and the Ningthoujas.[4] The Khaba-Nganba were the first to

[4] The traditional placement of these clans is given in the map in Chapter 3.

get absorbed into Meitei society, submitting to Nongda Lairen Pakhangba (the first king of the Meitei clan). The Luwangs lost their importance by the eighth century. Khumans, one of the most powerful among the clans, accepted the leadership of King Kongyanba of Mangang between AD 1323–55. Ningthoukhomba, another Meitei king, defeated the Moirangs, and King Charairongba (1697–1709) drove out the Angom king and made the people of this clan an integral part of the Meitei community. In this manner the composite Meitei community took shape.

The Manipuri language has its own script and is part of the Tibeto-Burman group of languages. In the manuscripts dealing with the Meitei alphabets, the *Mayek Laisal Khanba,* the first letters of the seven rows are representatives of seven days in the week. The letters are again classified as male, female, and eununch and there are deities associated with each one of them. For example, '*ka*' is male and represents *Pakhangba,* the ancestral deity of Ningthouja clan, '*ga*' is female and represents *Laisana,* the consort of Pakhangba and '*ng*' is eununch and stands for *Asiba* the eldest son of the ultimate creator and universal god *Atiya Sidaba.*

The Bengali script spread to the North East by AD 1300 and established a strong hold there even as with the invasion of Hinduism, all the scripts and texts of the ancient Meitei religion were burnt by the Brahmins, who are thought of as the chief propagators of Hinduism in Manipur, with the assistance of the Meitei king, Pamheiba/Garibniwaz.[5]

Theoretical Construction

The concepts of state, kingship, property relations, etc., have suffered from neglect in sociological and anthropological works of Indian society. According to Louis Dumont, 'As the royal function can hardly be observed now-a-days, there is a paucity of anthropological literature on this topic .... A *picture of whole* would require that the extensive modern historical literature be brought into focus from a sociological point of view.'[6]

[5] There has however, been a recent revival of the traditional Meitei religion and attempts are being made to popularize the ancient Meitei script and archaic texts.

[6] Quoted in R.K. Jain, 'Kingship, Territory and Property in Pre-British Bundelkhand', *EPW XIV*, 2 June 1979, p. 946.

Secondly, so far the use and development of this concept has been in the hands of those social scientists who have considered the state as a structure responsible for the exercise of authority, formulation of laws etc., in other words to those who have considered the state as an essentially jural institution. According to Geertz, in modern European ideological debate,

> politics is an endless jockeying for marginal advantage under ... "constitutional" rules of game, and the role of wigs and robes that everywhere attend it is to make the rules seem settled .... But, in all these views, the semiotic aspects of the state ... remain so much mummery. They exaggerate might, conceal exploitation, inflate authority, or moralize procedure. The one thing they do not do is actuate anything.[7]

Even if one wants to study only jural institutions one must know that power distribution in society does not rest in the hands of the king but is sanctioned by the people. Even the king is made and remains as king only when the people sanction his authority to rule them.[8]

Another aspect that social scientists have tended to ignore, while studying the form of authority structures, is its cultural component. This element, I believe, should form the basic premise if we are to understand the political ethos of any society. Myths, legends, folklore, and festivals form very important areas for studying a society's state structure. They either glorify and mythify the king or, when a king is unpopular, they tell the story of his punishment, or of how he ought to have been punished. A.M. Hocart goes as far as to say that:

> the ritual organization is vastly older than government .... The functions now discharged by king, prime minister, treasury, public works, etc., are not the original ones .... They were originally part, not of a system of government, but of an organization to promote life, fertility, prosperity by transferring life from objects abounding in it to objects deficient in it. Only gradually has the scope of this organization become enlarged, and its functions modified, until it has become a centralized means of organizing the activities of society.[9]

[7] Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth Century Bali*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1980, pp. 122–5.

[8] 'The Cultural element came ... from the top down and centre outward ... the power element grew, as we shall see, from the bottom up and periphery inward.' Ibid., 19.

[9] A.M. Hocart, in *Kings and Councillors: An Essay in the Comparative Anatomy of Human Society*, (ed.) Rodney Needham, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1970, xxvii–xxviii.

He proposes that rituals should form the basic premise to study a state apparatus since ritual 'exists where there is no government and where none is needed'.[10]

Denouncing theories based purely on economic factors, Hocart says that these are a very small fragment of life, and the pursuit of wealth is not one that inspires much zeal for common good. 'You cannot build a State on the narrow basis of prices and wages, but only on the widest co-operation of life. Ritual as long as it retains its meaning, is a co-operation for life.'[11]

In the course of development, the organization will need a remodelling in which there will be a shift from a head who was not a master to the making of a commander of a people who obey by and large, the social groups that were once equal would then stand in a vertical line. This process is called centralization by Hocart. With centralization there would be a process of specialization—or the selection of different individuals to perform different tasks. Rejecting the ideology of caste systems that claim that men are born with special endowments, Hocart says that if one observes facts one will see that special abilities are the consequence of special tasks and not the other way round, with the exception of the ritual function where the performer is not selected because of the aptitude, but by heredity and the supposed manifested will of god. Descent here becomes the chief qualification.

Hocart refers to the king of advanced and large communities or the head of a small tribe as '**Principal**' of the ritual. By this he means that he is considered the God or the saviour of earth sent by God. Two types of kings are distinguished—kings who include in their divinity the divinities of their chieftains, and kings who are God, and whose chieftains, consequently, are only a dimmer reflection of that God. The latter type is an example of monotheism. According to him monotheism, centralization, and moralization cluster together in the higher stages of development. With the growth of centralization, the role of the chieftains is not reduced but changed. They remain as important as ever, in fact they become the real masters of rituals and the state, but are no longer in charge of things, even while they remain responsible for maintaining society.

[10] A.M. Hocart, *Kings and Councillors*, p. 35.
[11] Ibid., p. 37.

Following Hocart's emphasis on ritual categories, Geertz builds a broader framework by emphasizing the need to study the whole cultural framework for developing the concept of a state.

The term state, according to Geertz, has at least three etymological themes condensed within it; status, in the sense of rank standing (the glories of blood and the state); pomp in the sense of splendour and display; and governance, in the sense of regency and regime. The third element to the exclusion of the other two has come to dominate modern political discourse. Such an approach does not fully explicate all the elements that constitute the concept of 'State'.

To explain his concept of state, or what he calls 'Theatre State', Clifford Geertz draws a parallel between the state-craft of the Balinese State and theatrical art. 'It was a Theatre state in which the kings and the princes were the impresarios, the priests the directors, and the peasants the supporting cast, stage crew, and audience.'[12] According to him spectacles, elaborate ceremonies and public dramatizations were not means to political ends, they were the ends themselves. 'Court ceremonialism was the driving force of the court politics.'[13] Thus power served pomp and not pomp, power. The ritual life of the court was not merely reflective of social order but also of supernatural order, upon which all individuals in strict proportion to their status sought to pattern their lives.

The concept of 'Theatre State' involves studying the state structure of a given society through the elements of culture, an understanding of rituals, an observance of symbolic codes in interpersonal behaviour among people, a study of the emphasis placed on myths, including origin myths, and in considering the people's perception of their state, their kings, and their society. So, it evolves from and revolves around a comprehensive understanding of a given society.

This approach, clearly, does not endeavour to define the universal principles that make for a state or its origin, nor does it propose to establish an evolutionary scheme, wherein the state is considered the result of modern society. No distinction is made between the state and society, where the state is a specialized institution separate from society.

However, when the state is placed in an evolutionary scheme of civilization, it becomes the product of modern society, with its spe-

[12] Geertz, *Negara*, p. 13.
[13] Ibid., p. 13.

cialized institutions for maintaining hierarchy, dividing the society into rulers and the ruled, and regulating social relations—which are not rooted in bonds of kinship. Within this kind of an evolutionary scheme, it is presumed that if a society does not have the given characteristics that accompany the specialized state apparatus, the state as a concept in those societies is also absent. Such societies are characterized as lineage societies, where kinship affiliation and rituals form its core. L. Krader's argument contributes to this perspective. According to him,

> In contrast to lineage systems the establishment of a state points to a different kind of society. A state registers the evidence of a political authority functioning within a territorial limit, and delegates its powers to functionaries. This is financed by an income collected by those who contribute regularly on an impersonal basis to its maintenance and acts as an instrument for integrating social segments identified not merely by ritual roles but also by economic functions.[14]

According to Romila Thapar,

> in a lineage system, kingship constitutes a character for establishing the authority of the ruling lineage through genealogical connections. Rituals reinforce the system. Myths of origin become significant in emphasizing the separate and special nature of the elite. The chief acts through and in relation to a lineage and not as an individual.[15]

> In contrast to the lineage system, the evolved state brings about a different kind of society. It is a collection of specialized agencies and institutions, both formal and non-formal, which help in maintaining an order of stratification. Obedience to officials is a necessary characteristic and this is not rooted in bonds of kinship. 'It regulates social relations in a society which is divided into the rulers and the ruled .... In its ideological function it justifies the social divisions, supports powerful religious systems ... maintains the coherence of heterogeneity (and) tries to inculcate a common cultural idiom.'[16]

Hence, the state becomes a very clearly defined political concept, which comes into existence only with the emergence of modern

[14] L. Krader, quoted in Romila Thapar, *From Lineage to State: Social formations in the mid-first millennium BC in the Ganga Valley*, OUP, Bombay, 1984, p. 11.

[15] Ibid., Romila Thapar, *From Lineage to State*, pp. 10–11.

[16] Ibid., pp. 12–13.

society. We do not here intend to question the ethnological evidences of the above statement. In this context, how is one to deal with and define a society, which has a specialized state structure, in the sense of specific role allocation, even while performing ritual roles; where the state is perceived as an extended family unit, and yet has a political role; where the concept of hierarchy as an inherent and ideal norm does not exist, and yet where a section of society does rule?

Burton Stein looks at history from a culturalist perspective. In his, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India*,[17] he discusses the relations between the Brahmin and the non-Brahmin cultures (the peasantry) and between the royalty and peasantry. He traces this relationship through both politics and ideology and considers it incorrect to think of kingly authority and the state as separate from the peasantry.

Stein calls the medieval South Indian state a 'segmentary State' where political authority and control were local in many ways and where the ritual idiom was prior in significance to the formal structure of state. The scope of the constituent units of the state was limited to well-defined and persistent ethnic territories. The chiefs were leaders of the dominant ethnic groups. At the same time corporate bodies representing the interest of various sections of society participated in public business. But the most authoritative interpreters of ideology and gate-keepers of status and authority were the Brahmins.

At the centre, which was the royal seat of the Chola and Vijayanagar kingdoms, the kings were recognized as sacred rulers, who had moral authority which was expressed through ritual idioms. Thus:

> South Indian kings were essentially ritual figures except in the often circumscribed core territories of their capitals where they commanded and managed resources and men by virtue of their compelling coercive power *ksatra*. They are the most important symbols of sacred, moral order to which all men must belong and, as such, theirs is a sacred and moral authority *dharma* beyond the limited territory of their *ksatra* (coercive power).[18]

Burton Stein relied on medieval texts of law, like the *Dharmashastra* and other literary works as well as the normative language

[17] Burton Stein, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India*, OUP, 1980.
[18] Ibid., p. 24.

of medieval inscriptions to produce this study on the peasant state in medieval South India.

The works of Romila Thapar and Burton Stein, emphasize the theme of governance in the sense of regency or regime. Though they rely extensively on religious texts dealing with the myths of origin of lineage and state authority, Thapar has mainly focussed on economic elements that lead to different kinds of society (from pastoral to agricultural), and thus to different kinds of political authority (from lineage to state). Burton Stein deals with the relation between the peasantry and royalty, but does not seem to touch upon the symbolism of power.

Historians and political scientists have mostly concentrated on the origin of the state. Not many have dealt with the analysis of a particular state in its contextual setting.

In the philosophical tradition, two chief theories of the origin of 'government' (which to them also implies state) have contended with each other. According to one, government was established by force, and its offices were instruments of control and exploitation by autocrats. According to the other, people felt the need for government. and came together to institute a 'social contract' in keeping with the 'general will'.

According to David Hume, the first rudiments of government (not distinguished from state) arose 'from quarrels not among men of the same society, but among those of different societies'.[19] A war with foreigners necessitates a government and a stricter application of laws than is customary in peace time.

A sizeable proportion of political theory suggests that in order to study the state, we must first separate the political from the social, the state being within the category of the political. The family, Church, beliefs and practices, do not in this view form part of the field in the concept of state.

> In the first place we must distinguish the state from the society. To identify the social with the political is to be guilty of the grossest of all confusions, which completely bars the understanding of either society or the state. It is perfectly obvious, if only we look at the facts of the case, that there are social forms, like the family or the Church or the clubs, which owe neither their

[19] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature, Book 3, Of Morals,* London, 1740, Sec. 8.

origin nor their inspiration to the state .... The state exists within the society but it is not even the form of society.[20]

Some scholars, while studying the state structure, do not blot out the concepts of family, emotion, and environment completely, but treat them as factors leading to the making of the state. Once the state is established, these factors are pushed into the 'social' compartment, while the state is studied exclusively as the political institution completely separated from 'social' institutions.

When we study a society through its cultural, cosmological, as well as political spheres, there is no need to mark it on an evolutionary scale, and nor do we need to arrange facts with the intention of creating generalized definitions. Instead, the nature of the state is understood by studying the perceptions, myths, and culture of that society. It then becomes a deep-rooted, contextual and complete understanding of the state structure being studied. This approach recognizes the ethno-historical elements and unique cultural features particular to the society under study, instead of striving for a universal definition of state and its unilinear path of emergence. However this does not rule out the inclusion of a comparative perspective.

Comparative Analysis

The concept of 'Theatre State' has not been widely applied as yet, but the work of Clifford Geertz stands as testimony to its bright prospects and wide acceptance. In his work on Bali Geertz explains his methodology and its applicability. He states that there are two ways of studying the history of a civilization. One is the period aproach, which depicts the major events like wars, reigns, and revolutions, and the second is to observe socio-cultural development in a continuum. In the second approach, it is very difficult to isolate a point at which things stopped being what they were and became something else. This approach does not emphasize chronology, or what people did, but rather the structural patterns of societal activity.

According to Geertz, both these ways should be combined to get a detailed outline, as well as a chronology of major events, so as to understand the importance of some events, or values, or persons over others. Along with the application of these two historical approaches, in my point of view, an anthropologist should also concentrate on

[20] R.M. Mac Iver, *The Modern State,* OUP, London, pp. 4–5.

the structure and function of the current system, since, it always bears a resemblance to that which one seeks to reconstruct, even while helping to relate it to the present. Interviews with the people in the field, an observance of their religious practices, a concentration on their beliefs and the enactment of certain myths combined with the traditional literature available on their history brings out a complete picture of the area under study. Geertz has also clarified his approach in a somewhat similar way in his study of Negara, but unlike my study he does not seem to relate it to the present. He states,

> Specifically, I will construct, both out of my own fieldwork and out of the literature, a circumstantial picture of state organization in nineteenth century Bali and then attempt to draw from that picture a set of broad but substantive guidelines for the ordering of pre and proto historical material in Indonesia, and beyond it South East Asia generally.[21]

This method distinguishes itself from the historical method in the sense that it endeavours to study the history of culture and the elements of civilization with only a few scattered remarks about kings, instead of a story about kings with scattered remarks about the elements of culture.

Geertz's theory of culture derives its basic theme from Max Weber. According to Weber, man is an animal suspended in the webs of significance that he himself has spun. It is from these webs that he derives the emergence of status differentiation in society. Webs, for Geertz, implies culture. It is important, thus, to interpret the meaning of these cultures rather than to create universal laws and generate definitions. It is only through the study of the meaning of a particular culture, that we can understand the webs that are so essential for a human being, and, hence also for society.

Cultural universals or generalized laws, according to Geertz, should not be taken as the central elements in explaining the processes of a society. This is because it is in the very cultural peculiarities of a people, in their oddities, that some of the most instructive revelations of what it is to be generically human, is to be found. The main task of work in anthropology is to find and analyse such peculiarities. At this point, many may argue that these kinds of notions tend to become ethnocentric in nature. This is why the comparative method becomes important. Comparison is the next step in understanding

[21] Geertz, *Negara*, p. 7.

human societies contextually. (It was through the comparative study of the Manipuri state structure with the Negara of the Bali islands that we postulated our main hypothesis of treating the Manipur state structure as an example of a 'Theatre State'.)

In studying the Bali islands, Geertz is convinced that the principal instrumentalities of rule lie less in the techniques of administration, and more in the arts of the theatre.

The sort of polity that it designates is one in which the interplay of status, pomp, and governance not only remain visible, but are in fact blazoned. Such a study reinforces the belief in the central role of display, regard, and drama in the state structure. Status is, therefore, the main criterion in this kind of state structure, and splendour its closest accompaniment.

According to Geertz's doctrine of 'exemplary centre' which is basically a theory of the nature and basis of sovereignty, the court and capital are at once a microcosm of supernatural order—an image of the universe on a smaller scale and a material embodiment of political order. The ritual life of court is not only reflective of social order but also, and more so, of the supernatural order. The legitimization of this system is done by the means of myths.

Kangla, the capital, for Manipur kings was similarly a reflection of cosmic power. It was believed to be the life-source, the navel of the whole state. The mythical king Pakhangba was and is still believed to be resting in the centre of this capital. The court ceremonies, such as those of coronation, were at once an embodiment of the conjugation of the divine male and female principle, and a symbol for the proclamation of a prosperous state. Copulation between the king and his queen reflected the procreation of cosmic energies and also enhanced the procreative power of its people and its earth.[22]

In Negara, as in the case of Manipur, the major institution of political life was kingship. In this context attributing the divine right theory would not be incorrect, but perhaps, insufficient. The context of divinity and the popular perceptions of the king should also be studied. It is important, according to Geertz, to study how these

[22] 'As the extravagance of state rituals was not just the measure of the king's divinity … but it was also the measure of the realm's well-being. More important, it was a demonstration that they are the same thing.' Geertz, *Negara*, p. 129).

characteristics emerged, how they were materially produced. It is here that the analysis of various myths relating to the concept of kingship becomes important. Individual kings come and go, but what they represent—the conception of order, the reflection of the divine—remains unaltered. 'The driving aim of higher politics is to construct a state by constructing a king. The more consummate the king, the more exemplary the centre. The more exemplary the centre, the more actual the realm.'[23]

The king was seen as a ritual head and also as a political 'actor' in Bali, and, as we shall see, this is true for Manipur too. It was the king's cult and the myths of origin that created him, raised him from lord to overlord, as progeny of the gods. Without such a theatre, such an image could not have even taken form.

Besides the commonly shared cult of kingship, Negara and Manipur also seem to have a similar character in social structure. The basic block of these structures are the descent group organizations. The politically supreme descent group comprises of a set of royal and noble houses—the Maharaj Kumars (MKs) and Raj Kumars (RKs) in Manipuri society.[24] Each such house has a certain degree of authority of its own, all such houses are considered related to one another by agnatic ties and are collectively seen as an integral part of one major descent line that traces all of them from one common ancestor. In spite of their intra-group rivalries for attaining both ritual and political power, the Nobles (in Geertz's study) and the Rajkumars (of Manipur), were more powerful than the king. Both were considered potential threats to the royal throne and were closer to the people than the king. They, therefore, could easily influence the people against the king.

The king in both the states was in close touch with the priests—Brahmins in Negara and Maibas and Maibis; (and later the Brahmins too) in Manipur. The priests in both these societies had access to the scriptural traditions and to esoteric ritual knowledge. In Manipur, when the state went through a transitional stage—moving from the traditional Meitei religion to the Vaishnavite form of Hinduism—the king had to face the wrath of the traditional priests. It was only after these priests were reinstalled and pacified, that the king was able to establish Hinduism as a state religion on the condition that the Meitei

[23] Ibid., p. 124.
[24] See Chapter 3.

religion would continue alongside. The royal tribunals of Bali, and the Manipuri royal chronicle, the *Cheitharol Kumbaba,* were maintained by the royal priests of their respective societies. Religious and aesthetic guidelines were also provided by them for their respective kings, to help shape the life at court.

In the economic sphere too there are parallels between Bali and Manipur. The Balinese women as well as the *Imas* (mothers) in Manipuri society played a very significant role (in Manipur they still do) in the marketing of indigenous goods and commodities. The bulk of trade was and still is in the hands of outsiders—the *mayangs*[25] in Manipur (constituting mainly the Marwaris and the Punjabis) and the Chinese and Muslims in Bali.

Status was a major governing principle in both societies. In the state cult, an assertion was made, over and over again, in a ritual vocabulary, that worldly status has a cosmic base and that the arrangement of human beings was more or less similar to that of the divine.

The major difference, however, between the Negara and the Manipur state structure, is in the concept of the king. While the king in Bali was an icon, the lord and completely divine, he was neither of these in Manipur. In Manipur, the king was not an object of worship, nor was he considered a god; instead it was the concept of kingship that was venerated and inspired awe, as a divine category. The state ritual, similarly, was not the simple coronation of a particular king but an expression of cosmic energies, through this ritual. Hence, the ritual of and belief in kingship were the object of respect and veneration for the people, and not the king as a person. The rituals related to the belief in kingship and involved reenactments of origin myths. They were extremely ceremonial and theatrical. Individual kings were only the 'actors', enacting the role assigned to them in this whole performance.

Yet, there were some kings whose reign brought about considerable change in the culture and politics of Manipur. These kings were deified as supernatural beings, but not as divine beings. The rituals, whether relating to coronation ceremonies, or recalling its origin in the *Lai-Haraoba* ceremonies[26] were detailed in their procedures, ceremonial in their enactment, and spectacular in their appearance.

[25] Also means outsiders.
[26] See Chapter 5.

It was a huge theatrical performance which established and re-established people's perception of their relationship between their ancestors, their rulers, and themselves. The Manipur state was, therefore, not only characterized by horizontal ties, but also vertical ones, since the gods and the ancestors were equal participants in the functioning of the state, along with its living populace.

There are also various other ethnographies of societies which reveal strikingly similar concepts and phenomena parallel to those of Manipur. We shall compare them with the Manipuri state structure to build a broad framework for a comparative analysis.

A comparison with A.M. Hocart's study of Arandas will be the focus of our attention in the next few paragraphs. His main objective in all his studies is to search for the origin of origins. In his study of the Arandas he asserts that rituals are the nervous system of a social organization and it is from rituals that the government of a society is formed. 'Ritual, as long as it retains its meaning, is a co-operation for life.'[27] In the organization of government, the 'performers' in the quest for life are not selected for their personal aptitude, but by heredity and the manifested will of gods. Descent is the chief qualification. When we go further we will also see that in Manipur too, through the concept of divine genealogy, how one particular group starts ruling the rest and how descent becomes the prime criterion for explaining its authority.

Like the *Lai-Haraoba*[28] which is a ritual enactment of the creation myth, the acts of creation of Arandas also seem to have the same theme as that of Lai-Haraoba. The emphais on sexual zones and enactments of the birth principle are built around the fertility principle. In fact, the basic theme behind the cult of kingship in both these societies is the fertility principle. The king is thought of as the sky. The sun invades the earth, and the king, through coition, 'absorbs the queen'.[29] The role and status of the queen is unclear, mostly because when the king is perceived as the universe, she is reduced to being only a part of him. The secondary role of the female is present even in Christianity. While God is present everywhere, even as He resides in Heaven, the earth is left to his spouse—the Church.

[27] A.M. Hocart, *Kings and Councillors,* p. 37.
[28] See Chapter 5.
[29] Refer to the coronation ritual in Chapter 2.

Bateson in his study of Naven states that he does not regard rituals, structure, pragmatic functioning, and ethos, as independent entities but as fundamentally inseparable aspects of culture. His work is important to us in one respect. He develops the relationship between the mother's brother and the ego as reflected in the Naven order. This category of kinship is also an important aspect of the Manipuri kinship structure where the mother's brother is emotionally as close to the ego as his own mother. The term *Naven* itself means the ceremonies performed in celebration of the acts and achievements of the *laua* (sister's child). 'Whenever a laua-boy or girl, man or woman performs some standard cultural act, and especially when the child performs this act for the first time in its life, the occasion may be celebrated by its *wau*' (mother's brother).[30] The 'achievements of *laua*' include a first-time homicide of an enemy or a foreigner, and a hunt. In general, whenever the *laua* performs any conspicuous act, the *wau* will respond by some expression of 'Naven' behaviour. The *wau* on such occasions dresses as a woman and is addressed as mother.

Due to Bateson's use of synchronic analysis, words like 'tradition' and 'history' seem to have no place in his study. But using terms such as 'structure' in place of 'tradition' and 'cultural premises', instead of 'mythology' do compel him to return to the origins, inspite of his assertions to the contrary. He negates history, since according to him it is not concerned with narratives and origins but with generalizations from narratives, generalizations based upon the comparative study of the process of culture and social change.

My work builds an argument contrary to his assertion. In this work, logic is developed mainly from the ethno-historical sources with the help of which I have explained the origins and the narratives of the state structure.

I believe that in symbolic actions, cosmological beliefs, and practicing-rituals, diachrony and synchrony coexist. These elements are created by an inescapable past: it may be history, or mythology, and/or an ever-existing present. This is how the culture of a society develops. It can never discard its past, and at the same time, cannot remain engraved in it, since it has also to move and mould anew in a continuous time frame.

[30] Gregory Bateson, *Naven,* Stanford University Press, California, 1958, p. 6.

According to John Beattie, 'no society is in a state of perfect equilibrium; conflict is always present, between individuals, between institutions, and also between values'.[31] The solution to such conflicts lies in the constantly moving culture. Hence a diachronic study is essential.

It is important to study people's perceptions of their past—historical as well as mythological. These perceptions come into focus when rites, ceremonies, or a social or moral rule needs justification, explanation, and sanctity. Such occasions serve a function of strengthening tradition. In constantly keeping this alive through its ritual enactments—which in repetition are kept afresh in people's minds—it also elevates people by tracing them back to a higher, better, divine, and supernatural reality. But it is only when we relate myths to the present, and through the present, understand its importance that we make the study contextually relevant. It is only a juxtaposition of synchronic-diachronic and static-dynamic that provides a complete picture of the society under study, especially when the study is in the field of political anthropology.

Tambiah talks of societies where ritual is enmeshed in and propagates the rules of social structure. In these societies, according to him the domain of religion, polity, and economy fuse into a single total phenomenon, where power and solidarity are brought into accord and 'institutionally assimilated to the natural'.[32] Disagreeing with Geertz, he argues that though the introduction of the concept of theatre state to explain the kingdoms that have a significant ritual order makes sense, terms such as 'practice' and 'performance' seem to have a western bias. According to him, what looks like mere practices and performances to an outside observer are in fact explained as ideological constructs by the people under study. Hence they should be written and analysed keeping this in mind. This work also emphasizes the need for sensitivity to such issues.

The pioneering study of African state structures in an anthropological perspective was done by a group of anthropologists, who studied the various African political systems and brought out a collection of their studies in a book entitled *African Political Systems*. This became a reference point for students of political anthropology,

[31] John Beattie, *The Nyoro State,* Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1971, p. 3.

[32] S.J. Tambiah, *Culture, Thought and Social Action: An Anthropological Perspective*, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts, 1985, p. 160.

and remains so even today. Meyer Fortes and Evans Pritchard in their introduction to this book divide the African systems into two categories—the primitive states (the state societies) and the acephalous systems (the stateless societies). The first group consists of those societies which have centralized authority with a system of government, and in which cleavages of wealth, privilege, and status correspond to the distribution of power and authority. The other group consists of those societies which lack centralized authority and in which there are no sharp differences between rank, status, or wealth. Although this kind of strict differentiation between the two types is difficult to accept, as I shall discuss later, I shall, at the same time, deal with what is defined by them as state structures, since their anthropological ethnography seems to correspond to the Manipur state structure. Secondly, the descriptive methodology which they have used, constitutes a part of my field method too. According to them, an African ruler is not to his people merely a person who can enforce his will on them. Rather, he is the axis of their political relations. Distinguishing the African ruler from European rulers, they say, 'His credentials are mystical and derived from antiquity. Where there are no chiefs, the balanced segments which compose the political structure are vouched by myth and their interrelations are guided by values expressed in mystical symbols.'[33]

Zulu, one of the kingdoms of South Africa, has been studied by Max Gluckman.[34] Zulu emerged as a nation through a series of wars between neighbours at the end of which *Shaka*, the head of the Zulu tribe, was victorious.[35] People of the newly formed nations were divided according to age for military and civil services, to serve the king. In Manipur this was called the *Panna* division and the services rendered were termed *Lallup*. The ceremonial position of the kings of both the societies was backed by their ancestral spirits. The royalty as well as the nobility in both the states were addressed ceremoniously. A similar proverb was also customary in both the societies, where it was said that the king should not trust his brothers, but rather his

[33] E.E. Evans Pritchard and Meyer Fortes (ed.), *African Political Systems*, OUP, Oxford, 1970, p. 16.

[34] Ibid., Max Gluckman, 'The Kingdom of South Africa', in *African Political Systems*.

[35] In the same way the Meitei kingdom was also established with Nongda Lairen Pakhangba as the first ruler.

affines and his relatives on his mother's side. And finally, what Gluckman saw in Zululand, was similar to what I observed in Manipur, that the old people generally shook their heads when remembering the severe bygone reign even while speaking of its glory.

The social stratification of Kede in Northern Nigeria resembles the social stratification of the Meiteis in Manipur. In both societies, 'status' is directly proportional to proximity to the king. Hence the group with highest status is comprised of the Chief's family, next to them are the Kade, who are of common status, while the lowest layer comprised of the original inhabitants. As a surprising parallel, in Manipur, the Maharaj Kumars and the Raj Kumars form the top layer, the rest of the Meiteis come in the next layer, while the lowest stratum is composed of Lois and Chakpas, the original settlers who did not accept Hinduism as their religion.

S.F. Nadel, in his study of the Kede area, adopts a perspective similar to ours as he states that it is not his task to examine how far the data on legends contains historical truth. 'Their importance to us lies rather in the sociological significance of the "truth" which they announce i.e., in the influence upon actual social life which the belief in this truth entails.'[36] It is with such a perspective that I have studied the Manipur state structure.

In both Tallensi, 'a stateless society',[37] as well as in Manipur, a 'state society', seniority confers authority, and the balance of the hierarchy of rights against the hierarchy of obligations lays the foundation for both systems. Both societies fear and venerate their ancestors—since the ideological foundation of these societies is the ancestral cult.

The similarity between all these studies and my work is not confined only to commonly held concepts, but extends to the systems of belief that underlie these concepts. There are, however, differences in the basic premises. A division of societies between 'state societies' and 'stateless societies' seems to express a predetermined notion of what a state is and what it is not. In comparing both these types of societies with the Manipur state I found similarities in concepts

[36] S.F. Nadel, 'The Kede: A Riverain State in Northern Nigeria', in *African Political Systems*, pp. 189–90.

[37] M. Fortes, 'The Political Systems of the Tallensi of the Northern Territories of the Gold Coast', in *African Political Systems*.

across both these types. One wonders, then, whether this dichotomy misses an important element in anthropological studies, namely, the cultural element, through an ethno-historical perspective.

The Nuer and Tallensi may not have a state structure as is familiar to a Western anthropologist, but that does not mean that they do not have a structure which performs the same function and which according to their definition may not be called a state. It may be a system, nevertheless, which helps the society to run cohesively. This 'ordered anarchy' may also have a specified structure, and it needs to be studied in this light.

The limitation in Clifford Geertz's methodology of cultural constructs lies in the fact that it does not emphasize the need for interaction with the people one is studying, dwelling only on the realms of mythology and legend.[38] It loses its relevance in understanding the peoples' present. The approach adopted by Evans Pritchard, Meyer Fortes, *et al.*, in their studies emphasizes interaction and observation at the cost of overlooking the role played by society's own cultural paradigm in constructing prevalent categories, and in explaining these in relation to ideal types constructed in their own minds, thereby failing to explain the reasons for the prevalence of such beliefs and practices.

There is, though, one thing common to both these studies, and also to the studies of Hocart, John Beattie, Tambiah, Sahlins, Blandier, and Bateson, and that is that all these studies presume that the elements of ritual, the belief in cosmology, and enactment of myths are predominant only in 'primitive' societies, while in advanced societies all these elements become obscure categories, and are replaced by specialized professional agencies. If we look at these studies with care we will see that none of these follow the journey made by cultural constructs to its present day forms, in other words, connect the past to the present or to record the existence or non existence of such categories in the so-called modern societies and to observe their current relevance.

Some anthropologists, whilst not connecting the past to the present have however studied ritual and ceremonial elements, considered the features of past societies, as situated in modern political structures. According to Myron J. Anoroff, 'The cultural context in which the

[38]Geertz's methodology dwells only on a textual study of culture, and does not relate it to its contextual relevance.

mobilization of political power takes place, the norms which dictate the rules of the game, and the style in which the game is played—these are vital yet frequently neglected aspects of analysis of modern political parties.'[39]

He studied rituals in a modern political party, Israel's Labour Party. He examined the taboos related to criticism of leadership and open expression of conflict, and the ritual functions of the standing committee, the highest committee in the pyramid of this party. 'Standing Committee was a ritually sanctioned forum in which normal restrictions on criticizing party policy or friendship were temporarily lifted. Members were allowed to freely express their diverse and often conflicting views on many issues, and then formulations of "consensus" were made and passed on to the conference for its "ceremonial" approval.'[40] In the spirit of diplomacy that characterizes modern day political structures, extreme care goes into proper planning of ritual occasions so as to foster the desired view of political relations. According to David I. Kertzer, 'Political reality is defined for us in the first place through ritual, and our beliefs are subsequently reaffirmed through regular collective expression.'[41] Our 'rational' faculties, our ability to think 'logically' and 'independently', to examine 'critically' and come to a 'rational' conclusion, are elements of 'modern' political structures, which if honestly studied are very hard to defend. Our faculties, and our thought processes are always embedded in our cultural past, building our perceptions according to our history and our legends and mythologies.

Geertz's model of a 'theatre state' is, hence, a relevant model for studying societies with an exemplary past, where ceremonies and rituals are strikingly blazoned and pervade all aspects of social and political organizations. His emphasis on the need to study a society's cultural elements to understand the structure of that society, has been accepted and applied by me in this present work. But, the problem arises when he suggests the way to study culture. According to him, one should study culture as a text. Observing elements of a society,

[39] S. Lee Seaton and Henri J.M. Claessen (ed.) *Political Anthropology: The State of the Art*, Mouton Publishers, The Haque, 1979, p. 179.

[40] Ibid., p. 287.

[41] David I. Kertzer, *Ritual, Politics, and Power*, Yale University Press, London, 1988, p. 95.

or doing ethnography, for Geertz, 'is like trying to read a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherences, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour'.[42] But texts are invariably read and analysed differently by different people. Analysing culture in this way may lead to biased opinions and different conclusions, without realizing which kind of analysis gives a complete and contextual insight. Robert M. Keesing emphasizes this view when he argues that cultures are webs of mystification, as well as signification, besides being 'webs of significance'.[43] According to him 'We need to ask who creates and defines cultural meanings, and to what ends.'[44] He further quotes Scholte who observed that, 'One cannot merely define men and women in terms of the webs of significance they themselves spin, since ... few do the actual spinning, while the ... majority is simply caught.'[45] Culture then, as stated earlier, must be placed in a context historically, economically, and politically.

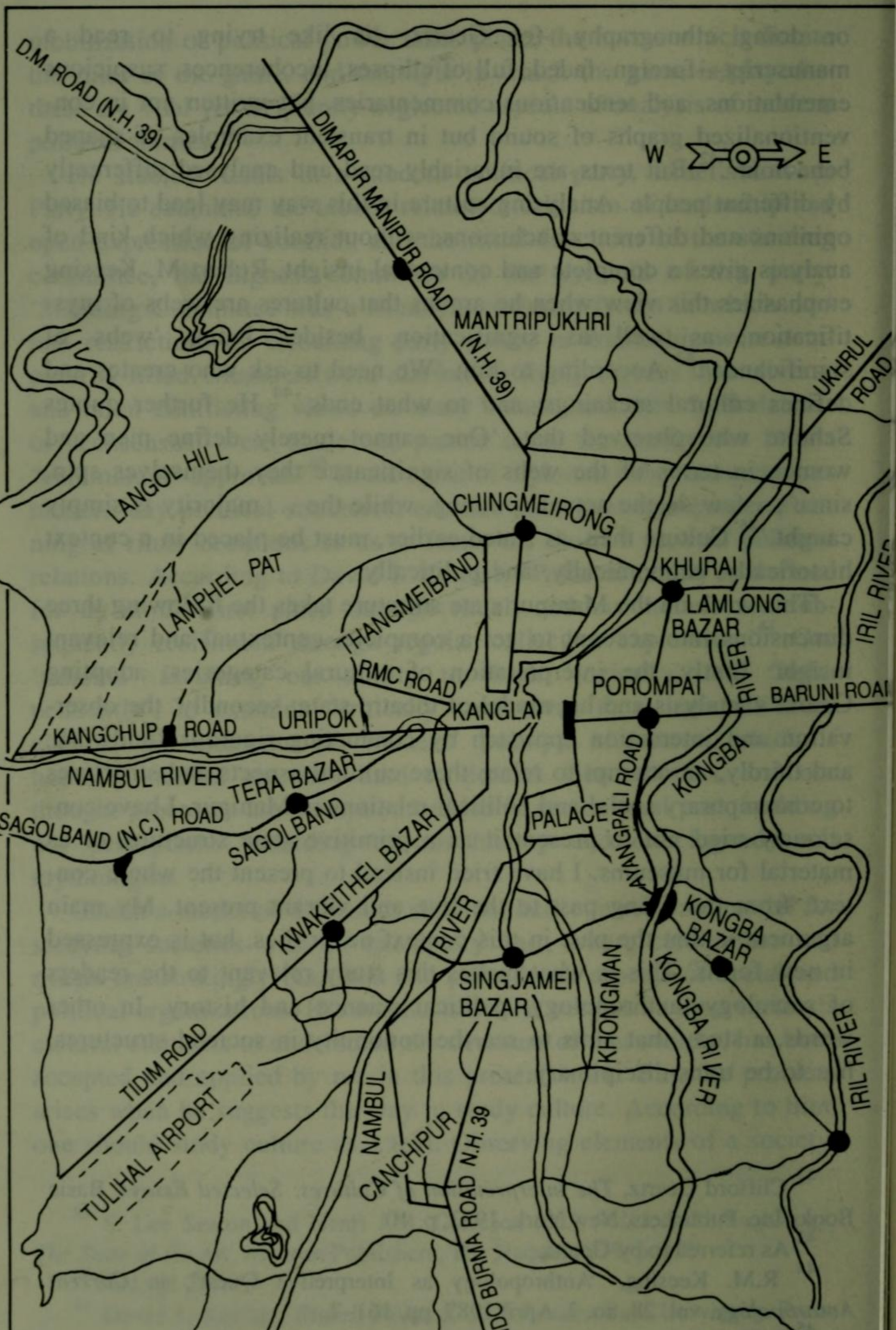
This work on the Manipur state structure takes the following three dimensions into account to get a complete, contextual and relevant insight: firstly, the interpretation of cultural categories, adopting Geertz's analysis and his model of theatre state; secondly, the observation and interaction approach by conducting rigorous fieldwork; and thirdly, an attempt to relate these cultural aspects and structures to contemporary social and political relations in Manipur. I have consciously tried not to present it as a primitive state structure, or as material for museums. I have tried instead to present the whole context, from the living past to the live and vibrant present. My main argument is that the past in this context never dies, but is expressed in new forms. This is what makes this study relevant to the readers of sociology, anthropology, political science and history. In other words, a study that aims to see the continuity in societal structures, has to be trans-disciplinary.

[42] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays,* Basic Books Inc. Publishers, New York, 1973, p. 10.

[43] As referred to by Geertz.

[44] R.M. Keesing, 'Anthropology as Interpretive Quest', in *Current Anthropology,* vol. 28, no. 2, April 1987, pp. 161–2.

[45] Ibid., p. 163.



Map of Imphal

1

Field Work

Interaction and Observation

'...in a dialogic approach it may not be very useful to conceive "culture" as something out there to be discovered, described and explained, but rather something into which the ethnographer, as interpreter entered. It is this dialogic aspect of culture, culture not as a given but as something made or rather co-created by anthropologist and informant in a "conversation" which needs to be emphasized.'[1]

It was through interaction, conversation, and observation that I grasped the meanings, concepts and codes of the people so as to understand their social system, their rituals, their beliefs, and their own understanding of the political edifice of their society. I also tried to get involved with some of their cultural activities and participated in their collective ritual performances. In some situations where my presence could have been a hindrance to the cultural process, I became a silent inconspicuous 'observer'.[2] My approach was not merely 'reading culture as texts', but also entering into a dialogue with my respondents. This can be observed in the following chapters by looking at the questions that I posed to the respondents. These do not have a structured pattern, but are instead informal, and spontaneous. One can also observe these elements by looking at the way my respondents reacted to the queries. Which is why I have at times

[1] R.K. Jain, 'The Dialogue: Its Nature and Problematic', in *Seminar*, March 1992, p. 3.

[2] Collective rituals like *Yaoshang* (Holi), *Kang* (Rath Yatra), *Lai Haraoba* etc., were those occasions when I could freely interact. However, on private occasions such as marriage, shradha etc. I was a silent spectator and the meaning of the rites was explained to me by my interpreter subsequently.

quoted their responses directly from tape-recorded sessions.[3] Whenever I visited the respondents I clearly stated who I was and what I wanted to do. This direct approach helped considerably in building trust and consequently building a relationship with them. In conversations, over a cup of tea, I asked about their inter-family relationships, marriages, perceptions about the past, and in turn, also told them about myself, my culture and religion. It will not be an exaggeration to record that this made them very willing and even enthusiastic to tell me whatever they knew.

Building an informal relationship and rapport was not very easy initially. It took a very long time. There were many times when I entered a household and introduced myself, but failed to get access to it, in the first attempt. I was asked to call on them another day, with no assurances that I would be able to meet them then. I then realized that there was a need to first establish a small network. I contacted one or two people of the three areas that I was to study through some common friends,[4] and requested them to accompany me to the various households. On being accompanied by them in their respective localities, my access became easier, since I was introduced as a friend of these persons. This initial introduction helped me in familiarizing myself with them and in removing the tag of 'stranger'/'outsider', in their perception of me. The familiarizing process was only the first step. I also learnt the prescribed behaviour, the cordial forms of address (in their own language), and sometimes also wore the prescribed form of dress, especially in religious places and ceremonies.

Inspired by one of L.B. Verma's articles in which he says, that people's memory should be intensely searched, I endeavoured to carry out a close interaction with the people. Citing Rekitov he says, 'In a way history is to society what memory is to individual... this social memory is preserved in documents as well as in oral tradition.'[5] The present work is the result of my involvement with the people through active participation at an emotional and intellectual level.

Manipuris, especially Meiteis, are by nature, very formal and polite. They are very proud of their cultural values, their unique festivals,

[3] They are mostly quoted in direct speech in the chapters, without even altering the words.

[4] They belonged to the community, which I was studying, i.e., Meiteis.

[5] L.B. Verma, 'Oral History in Manipur: Prospects and Problems', Unpublished Article, p. 1.

their language, their way of dressing. This is observable in the complete obedience that they express towards following their norms, which are like rules (*niyam*) to them. These prescribed norms are not only societal in effect, but also personal and are, therefore, followed strictly even in the private domain. In Manipur, there is a large number of local scholars, who even without much formal or specialized education are knowledgeable about various aspects of their society, and, have written about their history out of their own collections of archaic texts, religious books (*Puyas*), and their own perceptions. These people are very popular and are highly respected. Their popularity was perceivable, when all my respondents, also from the royal strata, asked me to refer to the books of these people and to go and talk only to them since 'they know everything'. They even persisted with their proposition in spite of my telling them that I did not want to know the prescribed notion of society, through one person, but rather the perception of the common people about their own social set-up. Later, however, I did feel the need to go through those texts and meet the authors to understand the kind of knowledge and the kind of people which others appreciate and respect, also forms a part of the objective of understanding society. The extensive works done by these local scholars based on traditional and religious texts and records made me realize that this society has a very rich writing tradition. These include a royal chronicle called the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*, other written records of migration of various people to this state, a book on flowers, religious texts (*Puyas*), and many others, giving detailed accounts of various aspects of Meitei culture of the past.

In fact, the written tradition seems to be as strong as the oral one. The oral tradition is also rich with folk tales and folklore, that play a role in remembering the mythical as well as historical past. For instance, the creation myth is narrated in the annual festival of *Lai-Haraoba.* The legendary story of *Khamba* and *Thoibi* is also enacted as part of the *Lai-Haraoba* festival and the tale is the favourite among the *penna* (a traditional musical instrument) players, who sing it with a lot of zest and emotional involvement.[6]

[6] There were tears, smiles, shrieks of excitement and an array of gestures through hand movements. It was the detailed theatrical performance of a single person sitting at one place.

On account of my academic background in Sociology, I found myself concentrating, primarily on people's perception, rituals, etc. initially. Gradually I became aware that this society, even though 'traditional', had rich written historical accounts. In fact, many observers tend to ignore this aspect.[7]

My access to these historical documents was only through their translated versions, since they were in archaic *Meiteilon* (Meitei language), which is no longer understood even by the majority of Meiteis.[8] Some of these texts were preserved in their original form. I was not allowed to photograph these ancient scripts. I was told that if I wanted to photograph them I should conduct certain rituals for each picture and request the *Maiba* (the traditional priest) to find out an auspicious date for each. If I were to photograph without conducting the required rituals, I was warned that some curse would befall me. It is needless to say that I therefore did not take any photographs.[9] Instead, I tried to copy some of the drawings, which are presented in the following chapters. Though I did not get access to the original written texts, I did obtain an important clue—that this society did cast a very secretive and mystical aura around its religious texts, practices, and beliefs which helped me in understanding them. According to Professor R.K. Jain, 'In contrast to a textual construction, the anthropologist's conversation generates, exchanges and transforms not only words, but the world of non-verbal signs as well, not only symbols—those arbitrary and conventional signs—but also icons and indexes and a whole array of other, more or less motivated signs.'[10] Other such instances occurred when my respondents restrained themselves in their answers, or said that, 'it needs an in depth knowledge which takes years to achieve', or just smiled, or remained silent. Depending on the question I had asked, I tried to decipher the meaning behind certain gestures or remarks. For example,

[7] According to Jack Goody, '...at least during the past 2000 years, the vast majority of people of the world have lived in cultures which were influenced in some degree by the circulation of the written word.' J. Goody (ed.), *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1968, p. 4.

[8] The script used by the Meiteis now, is the Bengali script. The earlier script was replaced by the Bengali script after Hinduism was made the state religion. This script is being gradually introduced now.

[9] Since that would mean showing disregard for their beliefs.

[10] R.K. Jain, 'The Dialogue: Its Nature and Problematic', *Seminar*, March 92, p. 3.

when I asked an elderly respondent about the highly talked about King Garibniwaz, who was physically taken away from the palace by a relative of his mother in his childhood. This was because of the prophesy that his father will face death by his own son. The respondent narrated the king's life upto the point of the king's enthronement and then became silent. I could clearly see that his silence expressed his unwillingness to talk about what followed, because the fact of Garibniwaz's confrontation with his father resulting in his death was perhaps a societal secret not revealed to an outsider like me. Similarly, during my conversation with a *Maiba* (traditional priest), I received statements like 'you would not understand', 'we have magical and mystical insights' or 'these things cannot be revealed to everybody', as responses to my curiosity in their belief systems underlining the concepts of soul, spirits, as also incantations recited to cure ailments in a person. According to them, such revelations about the belief system, if made to a person not assigned to know these, leads to the infliction of misfortune on that person, since inevitably such knowledge would be used by that person to fulfil his/her personal aims. As a proof, I was told about a woman, who came as a researcher and learnt the secrets of the traditional ritual practices. She started tapping these for 'black magic' and was consequently punished. I was told that she was hit by a truck and got killed.[11] This is called 'restricted literacy' by Jack Goody. According to him, such a situation arises when there is a strong association between writing and religion. For the Maibas and Maibis, it is learning the Word of God. They, exclusively, have access to the language of God (*Lairol*) and through it they have access to God, with whom the Maibis are in involuntary conversation while in a trance.

There is a need, then, to understand written traditions in their contextual setting and to analyse the unsaid and hidden meanings of these writings through an understanding of societal codes and symbolic gestures of the people of such a society. It is here, that on-the-field observation, interaction, and conversation becomes important.

[11] Jack Goody also narrates such an encounter during his stay in the Western Gonja town of Bole in 1965. 'A man from the Jebagtray section, who always wore a tattered gown and wandered aimlessly through the market place was said to have become sick because he had read certain parts of the Quran without taking the necessary precaution ... an independent approach to the written word is fraught with mystical dangers.' J. Goody (ed.), *Literacy in Traditional Societies,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1968, p. 13.

It is through these methods that we can understand the popular perceptions of people's beliefs and values, even when they respond with silence. We need to look inside their social set up, their routinized life style, their 'natural' responses to others, to certain incidents, and to specific and general festivals and rituals. In my endeavour to study this society, I slowly familiarized myself with the people, so much so, that my face became a familiar sight and did not evoke curiosity. This paved the way for an unobstructed observation of those events that evoked my curiosity. Understanding through interaction came about by spending time with the Meitei women, wearing their kind of attire, expressing interest in what they were interested in, and posing questions about their religion, their rituals, or perceptions about the past, all during the course of routine conversations. It was only with specific people, like old people with great knowledge, traditional priests and priestesses, and some of the learned Rajkumars, that I made formal preparations, planning a meaningful structured conversation in advance, recording the conversation, asking specific technical questions which, being professionals in their field, only they could properly answer.

An awareness of the need to follow a prescribed code of conduct expected of a person of my age and sex, was a conscious effort throughout. Bowing before elders, taking my slippers off before entering a house, addressing an elder women as *Ima* (mother), an elder male as *Pabung* (father), a slightly elder male as *Tamo* (this word is assigned the meaning of brother), or slightly elder female as *Iche* (elder sister), within the royal strata addressing elderly males as *Sanakhwa* (*Sana* = gold, *Khwa* derived from *Khwai* = for everyone; the revered one for everyone), while *Imasi* was used to address a Rajkumari, Maharajkumari, or the wife of a Rajkumar. To be polite and soft-spoken were the other codes that I followed. Since I followed the above mentioned codes of conduct, they were informal with me and thus failed to remain indifferent, as they would have been with an 'outsider'. With reference to the behavioural paradigm I was accorded 'insider' status. This opened the way for some intriguing and useful insights, but I did not get carried away, as no matter how 'Manipurized' I became, I remained a researcher. Also, I could never really become completely an 'insider' because of my difference in terms of physical features and an initial lack of knowledge about their language. I gradually learnt both to understand and speak their language. A Manipuri-Bengali-English dictionary helped me immen-

sely in this context. Yet, an interpreter always accompanied me, translating the conversations literally. I made sure that his biases did not creep into the process of translation.

The genealogies of the Meitei *salais* (clans) were another source through which I studied the interconnected kinship patterns of the society. Through these I was able to see how different groups lost or attained power, and it also helped me understand the hierarchical pattern or status-ranking in society. The genealogies are collectively called the *Sagei Salairol.* Each of the seven salais have their own genealogy, each of which is traced from every salai's original ancestor. Like the Bundela genealogy, which is called the *Vamsa Vali,*[12] the Sagei Salairol is a record of an exogamous patriliny, where the women descendants are not represented. However, the female affinal categories are well marked and given clearly in brackets below the names of the male descendants. Another peculiar element in these otherwise patrilineal genealogies is that all the salai (clan) genealogies' original ancestors are women, and their husbands are not even mentioned. However, in the all-encompassing genealogy for the seven salais taken together, there is no mention of these women originators, and, instead the seven salai are shown as descendants of the seven sons of the Father Void (Atingkok) and his consort Amamba or Taopiloini. I think that the explanation for having females as originators must lie in the possibility of it being the remnant of a matrilineal system, that might have been prevalent before patrilineality came about.[13] To verify this we also looked at the role of the mother's brother, whose importance is a mark for the existence of a matrilineal system.[14] I did find that this kinship category did play an important ritual role in the *rites-de-passage* rituals for his sister's child. In present times, of course, along with the erosion of matrilineality, the mother's brother's role has also been decreasing. However, his important position can still be observed in the enactment of rituals.

[12] R.K. Jain, 'Bundela Genealogy and Legends', in *Studies in Social Anthropology*: *Essays in Memory of E.E. Evans Pritchard by his Former Oxford Colleagues,* J.M.H. Beattie and R.G. Lienhard (ed.), Oxford Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975, p. 241.

[13] For further explanations see Chapter 4.

[14] Radcliffe Brown *et al.* have explained with differing ethnographic evidence the important role of the mother's brother as an essential feature in matrilineal societies.

The genealogies helped me a great deal in tracing the elements of certain social phenomena and processes. The clue that this society has remnants of matrilineality was picked up from the genealogies, which led to the study of the role of the mother's brother and from there to the position of women.[15] Detailed analyses based on genealogies are given in the following chapters. This picking up of clues from social processes and then its unravelling to reach the other end, through observation and interaction, created interconnected webs of the phenomena and ultimately helped in understanding it in its totality.

J. Barnes, in his article on genealogies states that, 'A pedigree is normally a contemporary statement, making assertions about connections between people, many of whom died long ago, whereas in a genealogy the ethnographer seeks to establish how these people during their life time were thought to be connected to one another, as well as how these connections are viewed now.'[16]

In Meitei society, there does not seem to be a clear-cut distinction between a pedigree and a genealogy. Tracing oneself to an exemplary ancestor is an important element through which one establishes one's status in the present. Underlining the importance of studying genealogies, Barnes states that,

> the large part played in the social life of any individual by the links he has or evokes with his several relatives has been conclusively demonstrated for a wide range of societies. Different lines of filiation are given different emphasis in the formation of social groups but everywhere cognatic and affinal connections have some significance in social organization.[17]

Through the study of Meitei genealogies of seven salais and the study of family genealogies I have tried to decipher such relationships. The detailed genealogies in Sagei Salairol stop tracing descendants once they reached the origin of the *yumnaks*, the extended family groups. The genealogies of these yumnaks are in the posses-

[15] In spite of their non-recognition in the records of consanguinal relationships, women in this society were, on observation, found to be quite vocal. Traditionally, they had been actively involved in economic activities within their own society. In fact a woman is well appreciated if she is a good weaver and enterprising. They do not hold up ideals like *Sati*. Feminine subservience is secondary when describing women of this society.

[16] J. Barnes, 'Genealogies', in A.L. Epstein (ed.), *The Craft of Social Anthropology*, Hindustan Publishing Corporation, Delhi, 1978, p. 103.

[17] Ibid., p. 106.

sion of their oldest member, the *Piba* who keeps adding the names of the male agnates born to the family and the affinal women attached to each. Such practices are, however, becoming rarer with not many families keeping their genealogies up-to-date. The royal segment, however, is still quite particular about it, and the genealogy of the king is distinctly marked within the genealogy of the Ningthouja salai. It is also maintained in the royal chronicle, the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*.

The Selection of the Field Areas

Geographically, Manipur is characterized by a valley at the centre and hills around this. The valley consists of three districts, Imphal, Thoubal, and Bishnupur, while the hill area is made up of Chandel, Tamenglong, Ukhrul, Senapati, and Churachandpur districts. The two regions set geographical limits for two types of cultural phenomena. The hills are the homeland of Naga and Kuki-chin tribes who are predominantly Christians, while the valley is the homeland of the Meiteis, mostly Hindus. Meitei Muslims (also called *Pangals*) form a small percentage of the population in the valley.

The seven salais, Khuman, Angom, Chenglei, Khaba-Nganba, Luwang, Moirang and Mangang/Ningthouja, originally had their own capitals in their respective areas, and later when they recognized the supremacy of the Ningthouja king, they accepted the Kangla in the centre of Imphal, as the capital. Major McCulloh in his book, *Valley of Munnipore*, states: 'The records of Munnipore contain a long list of chiefs, unaccompanied by any notice of their actions, further than the occasional killings of distinguished members of adverse tribes, through whose fall the Meitei influence was increased.'[18] This oversimplified, carelessly written account has been quoted only to give weight to my statement about the subservience of other salais to the Ningthouja king. It is, at the same time, a pointer to the typically arrogant attitude afflicted with a 'they' and 'us' perspective characteristic of 'colonial' anthropologists. In fact, there are many who have written books on Manipur. Of them only T.C. Hudson can be studied as a more or less balanced writer.

My work is an attempt to study an area which has not been explored by anthropologists. I certainly do not claim this to be an

[18] Major McCulloh, *An Account of the Valley of Munnipore,* Gian Publications, New Delhi, 1978, (Reprint), p. 5.

'objective' study, but rather a consciously 'involved' study. It is an attempt to encourage further study by researchers in this anthropologically rich area. Objectivity, I believe is one premise, which, if claimed by an anthropologist, amounts to a false statement. For me, there is no such thing as objectivity. Instead, the elements to strive for are rationality, truth, and involvement. These three elements can provide the reader with more than the anthropologist's attempts to objectivity. Values, beliefs, and practices are situated in the realm of emotion, feeling, and the collective sentiments of a society which get manifested materially. An anthropologist's work is to get into the realm of these collective beliefs, values, and rituals to derive the intrinsic meaning, or the basis for the functioning of the whole social system, and not to pass 'objective' statements.

Since AD 33 onward, Kangla, the mystical and traditional capital of the Meiteis in Imphal, has been a core area, believed to be the seat of Pakhangba, the mythical and first king of the Meiteis, radiating from its centre the theatrical art of coronation, the flaming mouth of Pakhangba and the cultural ethos of the Meiteis. It has also been at the centre of political upheavals in the form of tribal rebellions, wars with Burma, and the bloody war with the British of 1891. It has been, and still is, the symbol of veneration and awe for the people of this state. At present, this area is occupied by the Assam Rifles, a para-military force of this country. People are raising their voice to oust this para-military contingent to restore the sanctity of this place.

Masao Yamaguchi, who studied the theatrical elements of the Japanese kingship structure, says that wherever kingship constitutes a model in popular imagination for understanding and making sense of a world-view, it survives as a part of culture, even if it has vanished politically. 'If kingship cannot be ignored even today, it is because it is deeply embedded within the most fundamental elements of the way of thinking of a people and has supplied them with a basic model for understanding the world in their own terms'.[19] Manipur is also one such society.

Before proceeding further, I will describe in brief, certain areas in Imphal, the capital of the state, which still reflect certain elements of kingship.

[19] M. Yamaguchi, 'Kinships, Theatricality and Marginal Reality in Japan', in R.K. Jain (ed.), *Text and Context,* Vol. II., Philadelphia Institute for Study of Human Issues, Philadelphia, 1977, p. 151.

The Palace Compound or the Palace Area replaced the Kangla, from where the Manipur king was made to evacuate by the British to make for a place where they could station their troops. All the buildings were not reconstructed. Only those which still had functional importance were reconstructed, like the palace for the king, the Sri Gobindajee temple, the Durbar Hall and some smaller temples. The polo-ground, which was earlier an integral part of Kangla, was shifted to another site. Structures like Prince Tikendrajit's palace, the Coronation Hall, the Durbar Hall, etc., were razed to the ground or left to ruin in the Kangla premises. The palace ground attracted my attention since it was the symbol of the continuity of the kinghip element in the matrix of Manipuri culture and at the same time its discontinuity. The Gobindajee temple, with its elaborate rituals and exuberant celebrations is living testimony of royal patronage that had been bestowed on the Hindu-Vaishnav faith. The palace of the king is not a museum piece, merely reflecting the memories of the past, but is still the residence of the second son of the last reigning king, Maharaj Budhchandra The second son, Maharaj Kumar Okendrajit Singh who died very recently in 1996 did not hold any powerful position with reference to the contemporary set up and the palace was not well maintained because of the depletion in royal resources. Yet, Maharaj Kumar Okendrajit Singh was invited on several occasions for the *Kang Jatra,*[20] the *Jalkeli* during Holi, and other social gatherings, to 'grace the occasion'. People regarded him as their 'king'. His presence in any gathering was marked by reverence and awe. He was considered the embodiment of the glories of the past, and of mysticism. I must mention here that the Manipur kings, even in their most glorious days, were not perceived as situated in the realm of politics. They were venerated more as ritual heads. But in those days ritual and politics were also not considered separate entities.[21]

The residence of the 'Angom Ningthou' is situated right across the road from the Gobindajee temple. It is in a poor physical state due to the continuous denudation of resources caused by Angom Ningthoun's descendants. I visited this place accompanied by the daughter of the sister of the last 'Angom Ningthou', who herself was around 90 years old. She had felt emotionally overwhelmed after

[20] See Chapter 5.
[21] The detailed discussion on it is given in the main text.

visiting the residence of Angom Ningthou and had prayed devoutly in the temple situated in its premises.[22]

The palace area as a whole was a very wide-spread area which used to belong to the royalty. Some portions have now been sold off to private individuals. The palace compound forms the core area within which is situated the residence of Maharaj Kumar Okendrajit Singh, and at its back are the residences of the other brothers of Maharaj Bodhchandra. Prominent among them is Maharaj Kumar Priyobrata, who was also the first Chief Minister of Manipur. On the whole, all the Maharaj Kumars (MKs) of Manipur stay in this area. Besides them, on its peripheries are located the Brahmins, who look after the functioning of the Gobindajee temple and the family rituals of the MKs. There are around thirty Brahmin families, in the vicinity. There is also a sizeable section of hill people residing in the peripheries of this area, totalling around 148 households. Many of them are recent settlers, but some have been living here for a long time. They seem to be the descendants of the manual labourers or soldiers who served the Meitei kings. I have stated later, how and why the hill people recruited themselves to the Meitei kings' military services, in spite of the fact that they did not recognize their sovereign rule in the hills.[23] Meiteis from all the seven salais also reside here. The Angoms, who were politically important, are numerically small in number in this area; there are only seven Angom households. Along with the office of *Bamon Sabha* (constituting the hierarchy of Brahmins in charge of looking after the Gobindajee temple), the office of *Pundit Loishang* (hierarchy of priests involved in the traditional Meitei faith) is also situated prominently, adjacent to the Gobindajee temple. The Palace Ground, thus, is a historical site and at the same time a living society. The MKs are ideal sources of information, via their own reflections on the past and their perceptions about the present. One can study the culture of royal households not through their chronicles, but through conversations, and observations.

Another characteristic area is Sagolband. It is densely populated and is situated in the heart of the city near the *Cheirap* (the courts), across the Nambul river. Its most prominent feature is the Vijay

[22] Angom is one of the seven salais. Angom Ningthou held a very high position among the nobles. Though *Ningthou* literally means king, it is used here as the chief of Angoms.

[23] See Introduction and Chapter 6.

Gobinda temple and a large pond-like water area which is the site for a major Manipuri festival called the *Heikru Hidongba*. The Vijay Gobinda temple has the idol of Lord Krishna. According to legend, King Bhagyachandra had a vision of an idol of Lord Krishna in his dream. But when the idol was carved, it turned out to be a little shorter than what he had seen in his dream. It was, therefore, given to the ancestors of the RKs living there who have since then been taking care of it. This is the premise on which the relationship between the Rajkumars and the Maharaj Kumars rests. The relationship between the Gobindajee temple in the Palace Ground and the Vijay Gobinda temple in Sagolband is of mutual respect. In the event of a festival being celebrated in the Vijay Gobinda temple, the chief priest of the Gobindajee temple has to fulfill the ritual of coming to the Vijay Gobinda temple in a procession and gracing the occasion. I was told that, if he failed to go, the relationship between the Rajkumars and the Maharaj Kumars, faced the possibility of being severed. It seemed that the power of the Maharaj Kumars revolved around the ritual performances that took place in the Gobindajee temple, while that of the Rajkumars rested on the ritual performances at the Vijay Gobinda temple. Ever since Hinduism was made a state religion, the power of the royal hierarchy emanated from these two temples. Hence, in spite of these temples being exclusively in the religious domain, they were also important in the political and social spheres.

The Sagolband area has a dominant strata of RKs whose ancestors were the closest ministerial colleagues of King Garibniwaz. In conversations with them, I found that they (the RKs' ancestors) were most vocal, and were a constant check on the king's misrule, forever ready to overthrow him on any point of dissension. They were also closer to the people than the kings and, therefore, could easily influence them. Gathering the RKs' perceptions, about the power structure and cultural elements seemed important, since they were themselves so enmeshed in and between these two categories. Their role as mediators between the king and the people also made them an important category to study. Besides the Rajkumars, who now constitute about 114 households, there are about 37 Brahmin households, and about 389 households of Mangang/Ningthoujas, Khuman and Luwang.[24] This area carries a political aura around it and quite

[24] The Mangangs/Ningthoujas include the category of the Rajkumars, since they all belong to this salai, but we have counted the RKs separately.

a few of its residents feel a strong sense of pride in being RKs. Upheavals that occurred during the reign of a king, or genealogical relations with some other kings, were not considered so much as historical facts, but rather as personal, family events/relations that should not be revealed. They were particularly silent about their ancestry and their land holdings. They also made me aware of my 'non-RK status', as when an RK woman (addressed as Sija), who was initially very open with me suddenly became reserved. On enquiring, I was told that she did not approve of my use of the left hand when I picked up a cup of tea to give it to her. Being an RK and an elder, I was expected to embody the required etiquette of offering things only with the right hand to her.

Khongman Mangjil is located on the periphery of the core area of Kangla. Its population consists of followers of the traditional Meitei faith and also followers of the Hindu-Vaishnav faith. I found it intriguing that a small place like this managed to be different from the rest of the population of the city, and yet did not invite repercussions, such as, facing the possibility of expulsion from society.

Khongman Mangjil is a long and thin area located in the south-east direction of the Kangla. An important feature of this area had to do with a woman who claimed to have conversations with the various, traditional Meitei deities. She holds her *'Durbar'* every Wednesday and Sunday, from early morning till late evening. On these days she used to be in a state of trance from early morning and wore the dress of the directional deity she was going to interact with on that day. I attended her Durbar in a specified dress; a beige coloured *Phanek* (woman's lower garment) that extended over the breasts and a white *Inna-Phi* (a shoulder wrap around), with offerings of fruit for the deity that she was going to interact with. Her Durbar was an elaborate structure with images of the traditional Meitei gods, and the *Paaphans* (symbolic representation of Pakhangba, the first mythical king). People from all over Manipur came to this place to get their ailments cured and to gain in awareness about themselves. This woman, or *Ima* as she was called, would sit at the centre of the performance and lead the whole show. This Durbar was a living testimony to the theatrical factors that influence the beliefs of the people of this state.

Observations, informal conversations, and intensive interaction were the main pillars of my fieldwork, along with the study of history and genealogies.

I have divided this work into six main sections starting from a historical analysis to a discussion of the Meitei polity and its relevance in contemporary society. It begins with the mythological and legendary phases, and then goes on to deal with the different aspects of the society including myth, tradition, people's perception and their present day ethos. Geertz's cultural approach that entails the study of something that was considered to reside only in the sphere of politics in a larger cultural context, and thereby bringing about a totally different approach to the study of state structure was a perspective that I strictly adhered to in my work.[25] His attempt to understand the complete cultural framework, and to consider the state as an integral part of it brought about a composite analysis and provided a new dimension in studying state structures through the perspective of an anthropologist.

In the chapter 'The Early Meitei State', I have discussed how myth, legend, and history are intertwined with one another. People's perception of their gods, their kings, and their ancestors, is not in terms of separateness. Narrations of the past that evoke magical feats and mystical aura, may seem mythical to us, but it nevertheless forms an integral part of the history of the society. This is why I have discussed the origin myths in detail. A brief analysis of certain features of the regimes of various Meitei kings as remembered by the people gives an idea of the historical background from the point of view of people's memory. The concept of 'king' is discussed later giving vivid details of the emotional expressions that people gave to interpret the bond that they felt for the king as a conceptual entity. Coronation is the most striking feature to exemplify the theatrical elements of the Meitei state structure and it is, therefore, discussed comprehensively. And lastly, I focus on an aspect of Kangla, the capital, as the life giving source for the whole state, that symbolically reaches the height of theatricity; its importance is evaluated by the extent of disenchantnent that is felt among the people to watch their life giving source getting transformed into an Assam Rifles camp, where they are not even allowed to enter.

Next I discuss the social structure in which the main feature is the institution of *salai*. The seven salais constitute the composite Meitei society. These salais are large groups tracing their origin to a common ancestor in the mythical past. They can be loosely defined

[25] For details see Introduction.

as clans. The Maharaj Kumars and Raj Kumars form a distinct identity within the salai structure. Besides these salais, there are the hill people belonging to the Naga and Kuki-chin groups, the Brahmins, the Meitei Muslims called *Pangals*, and the *Mayangs*.[26] Among the salais are some members who were declared outcasts by the kings for not accepting the Hindu religion. They are the *Lois*, who still live in the peripheries. All these segments of society are discussed in detail.

The analysis of the belief system in Chapter 3, starts with the discussion of the beginning of civilization as a result of copulation of the supreme male and female principles, which are still venerated as the ultimate forces, beyond which there is nothing, not even time and space. What is there is just a Void. The analysis then shifts to the features of the traditional Meitei faith. The levels of belief in people's minds is discussed in detail based on extensive and intensive interviews. I conclude this chapter by proposing that the human body, the state structure, and the cosmos are all based on the same principles—mainly the fertility principle, and that one can draw a homology between the functioning of all these structures. In other words, I argue that the world view of the Meitei people remains the same while discussing the state structure, where the king forms the core principle or in the discussion of the human body, where the soul forms the core. Both these domains are permeated by a common aspect of cosmology. The cosmic realm and the social realm thus become one.

Chapter 5 is a descriptive and detailed analysis of the rites and rituals of the Meitei society. I felt that these were the fields where Hindu Vaishnavism had its maximum effect, as it succeeded in diluting, and sometimes disintegrating, the rites and rituals pertaining to the traditional Meitei faith, and in turn firmly establishing the rituals and festivals pertaining to its own religion, especially the collective rituals, and rites-of-passage rituals for the intermediary stages of life. Birth and death rituals are in the main situated in the arena of the traditional Meitei faith. Construction of a house is also considered an integral element of rites and rituals and hence is discussed under the same topic. I also discuss the distinct division of the left from the right, where left is death, female, and low in the social hierarchy while right is life, male, and high in the hierarchy. Discussion on public rituals is based mainly on detailed observation.

[26] A term used for outsiders or those who are not of the Mongoloid race.

The discussion on the kinship system in Chapter 6, begins with the assertion that the whole of Meitei society is conceptualized as one big family. I began my work on the kinship system with the collection and listing of terminologies, grouping various kinds of relationships that are accorded the same term, and by trying to explain these with equivalent expressions in English. I have tried to arrive at the closest meaning possible, but have had sometimes to be content with terms that described the relationship only partly. The column on the extreme left of the kinship table (see Chapter 6) in this sense becomes important since even when the English equivalent does not explain the whole term, the description of various relationships it entails can make the reader understand the meaning behind each term; for example, if '*Dada*' or '*Tada*' in Meitei kinship terminology is only explained by an English translation, which would be 'elder brother', a non-Manipuri reader will decipher the meaning as one's own brother or one's male cousins. But its only when we look at the column of relationships, that we realize that it also means a whole lot of other relationships including father's brother's elder son, mother's sister's elder son, wife's sister's husband, father's sister's daughter's husband, mother's brother's daughter's husband and husband's sister's husband.

One of the major problems confronting students of anthropology in studying an alien and culturally unfamiliar society is the need to hunt for an equivalent terminology in his/her language appropriate for an explanation of some of the social processes of that society. Any term that explains a phenomenon of a certain region does not evoke just a language that can then be made sense of by translating. It carries with it the specific norms, culture, and values peculiar to that society. To derive a parallel term from all the terms of a society in the field worker's own language would distort and falsify the society, or, the process under study. In my point of view, one should note the original ethnological terms of the phenomena under study and explain these with reference to their ethnographical settings. A language has the power to explain, only in its own cultural setting, since it is a part of it. So how can a foreign language at any time provide terms for a culture of which it is not a part?

A.M. Hocart while discussing the kinship system points to a similar kind of problem. According to him:

> when we explore a new language, we infer the meaning of the words from the objects to which they are applied. The first object gives us a preliminary

definition. That may chance to be right, but further experience may compel us to revise it ... one of the most frequent cases is the translation of the so-called classificatory kinship terms.[27]

He explains his point by giving an example from the kinship terms of Melanesia. According to him, the person most commonly called *Tama* in this society was the Ego's father. So, in the dictionary of the anthropologist the meaning of the word *Tama* became father. But it was later noticed that other men, besides the father, were also addressed as *Tama*, and that no single word in English could explain this term. This problem was apparently solved by introducing expressions like 'kinship extension' implying that the meaning of the term as father is primary and that all other uses result from extending the term to an ever-widening circle of kinsmen. This meant that the word *Tama* was originally used only for father and was later extended to other kinsmen. The historicity of this assumption becomes untrue, and leads to faulty conclusions. Hence, according to Hocart, 'before we can apply it [the comparative method][28] we must get our facts right. To that end let us forget all we have ever been told about the meaning of classificatory terms and rediscover the language.'[29] That is, discover the language of the society we study.

It was by situating the Meitei kinship terms within the Meitei cultural context that I deciphered the existence or the acceptance of bilateral cross-cousin marriage in the society. But I noticed a change in the terminology for cross-cousins, which was earlier the same as that used for affines. It had over time become similar to the terminology used for parallel cousins and one's own siblings. Hence, over time, the principle of exogamy seemed to have expanded as the cross-cousins began to be considered similar to parallel cousins. According to Rodney Needham, bilateral cross-cousin marriages are by no means compulsory, but are approved as the correct practice in the societies where these are allowed.[30] This is true for Manipur too.

The terminology for kinship alliances of Meitei society are distinguished according to age, sex, and descent of the ego. Detailed

[27] A.M. Hocart, in R.L. Raglan (ed.), *The Life Giving Myth and Other Essays*, Tavistock Publications Ltd., London, p. 173.

[28] Brackets are mine.

[29] A.M. Hocart, *The Life Giving Myth and Other Essays*, p. 174.

[30] Rodney Needham, *Structure and Sentiment*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1962.

tables of these criteria are given in the chapter. The question of incest has also been dealt with. It (incest) is also explained through the morphology of kin terms. After dealing with marriage rules, the discussion revolves around the domestic groups and the kinds of interrelationships that exist within the family unit. In my concluding remarks, I discuss how the family, the state, and the cosmos, form one unit for the generation of the entire society.

The last chapter focuses on the polity of the Manipuri state structure. The functions of the king are described and the kinds of checks and balances that operated on him, are discussed. The recent history that relates to individual kings is discussed here to give historical substance to the cultural propositions that I presented earlier. I also discuss the emergence of a new religion, the importance given by the people to the dreams dreamt by the king, and the slow erosion of kingship as a concept in the realm of cosmology. It was during this time, after the Anglo British war of 1891, that the king lost much of his political power, but even today the respect for the king persists in the people's mind.

I also study the state structure that was at first like a decentralized institution, which however later incorporated elements of a centralized, feudal structure during the reign of King Garibniwaz. A curious feature is observed with regard to this transition. When the system was in a decentralized state, the king was elevated to the position of a supernatural being, and inspite of that had to prove his capacity to become a king, but when the system made its shift towards a centralized structure, the mysticism and the divinity accorded to kingship began to fade away. This led to the establishment of Hinduism as a state religion, where Garibniwaz's attempts to prove that he was the incarnation of Lord Vishnu, failed miserably. The reason for this failure lay in the fact that compelling people to change their religion was like overhauling their world view and wiping out their myth of genesis which was like severing them from their roots, a severing which was never successful.

With the transition to a centralized state structure, the rule of primogeniture also came into vogue; constant feuds to capture the throne dimmed the aura of divinity around it and the rituals associated with kingship lost much of their meaning.

Then the period during the struggle with the British saw the emergence of personalities, among whom were the crown prince Bir Tikendrajit, the army general and others who fought with great valour

and became national heroes. The economy is another aspect discussed in this chapter, where the socio-economic ideal is that of '*watta-padaba*', which means, neither short of nor in excess of the requirements of life. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of culture as a phenomenon or process that can never be perceived as static. An ever changing and ever evolving process, which reveals itself as such in situation adaptations. Which is not to say that there is a complete overhaul of culture over a period of time. On the contrary, the assertion is that the basic world view of the people retains its strong hold even with the integration of the social, political, and cosmological elements. These elements work as a cementing factor, and the same cultural categories are then seen in a modified form.

The conclusion of this whole study revolves round a discussion of the political, societal, and cosmological categories of the Manipuri kingdom and the theatrical elements present in these categories.

This chapter also studies how these various elements constitute a kind of structure and a process, which encapsulates the history of the people, as well as present interpersonal relationships and present perceptions of different groups, about one another. This kind of study helps in understanding the attitudes and how they continue to influence different identities. Therefore, to study the present social structure and polity one should go into these categories, since these are those powerful determinants that play a crucial role in understanding the present ethos.

The concept of a theatre state is a unique one developed from the perspective of an anthropologist. It does not limit itself to the study of politics, governance, rulers, and power alone, but instead involves the study of culture, including ceremonies, splendour, pomp, the enactment of rituals, social structure, beliefs and values, and the principles governing family units. It is built on the study of various aspects and hence portrays a holistic view of the state structure rather than merely one element of it, which may be just governance. It is then a contextual understanding, which remains relevant for understanding contemperary problems since these have to be understood in relation to the basic world view underlying these. It is this very basic world view that this study endeavours to understand.

2

The Early Meitei State

The Three Phases: Mythical, Legendary and Historical

The Meitei mind does not perceive history merely in terms of the factual, chronological events of the past but goes back to the very origin of the Meitei being. It is hard to make out whether the kings, or the leaders, or the learned men are gods, mythical, or deified ancestors, or actually human beings who once existed. History, even as recent as of the nineteenth century, is narrated suffused with elements of magical power, tales about the strength of superhuman beings, and anecdotes of dreams as explanation for their existence in actuality. The past is an integral part of the Meiteis' present. For every ritual that they perform they invoke the spirit of their ancestors, arrange specified seats for them, offer food, and also bid them farewell at the end of the ritual. They remember their origin at every festival. They consider their God as supreme ancestor from whom they claim descent.

The Origin Myth

There is a supreme being called *Atingkok* (Father Void). He along with his consort *Amamba* (left-side of Atingkok) told *Atiya Sidaba* (Immortal Sky Father) and his consort *Leimaren Sidabi* (Mother Earth who lives seven layers below the earth) to create the world on earth. Atiya Sidaba had two sons *Asiba* and *Konchin Tingthokpa*. Atiya Sidaba then told the two sons to go around the universe seven times to attain knowledge. While Asiba (the elder one), being physically stronger, literally went around seven times, Konchin Tingthokpa (the younger one), on being advised by his mother, went around his father's throne seven times. Lord Atiya Sidaba, pleased with his

younger son's wisdom, conferred the title *Pakhangba* (the one who knows his father) on him. He also became the complete incarnation of his father. Since then, he is (most of the time) also referred to as Atiya Sidaba. The elder son Asiba was told to create the physical world. Asiba created nine highlands, *Nonglen*, and nine lowlands, *Leirol*, the moon, stars, and rivers. He is also considered to be the founder of agriculture. He was also named *Sanamahi* and became a household deity for protection from all evils. For creating human beings, Atiya Sidaba (Sky Father) sought the help of Atingkok (Supreme Being). Atingkok opened his mouth and showed him (Atiya Sidaba) the world of living beings. With tremendous joy, Atiya Sidaba drew out the living beings from inside the mouth of Atingkok.

Another version of the origin myth was related to me by one *Maichou.*[1] According to him, when the task of creating the world was complete Atingkok wanted people made in his own image residing in it. Atiya Sidaba made an exact replica of Atingkok. Asiba then went inside it and gave life to it, while the four directional deities, *Koubru, Marjing, Wangbaren* and *Thangjing*, also considered as guardian spirits, took their places inside this body. Thus a man was created who acknowledged the supreme authority of Atingkok and venerated it.

In yet another version Atingkok manifested himself in two beings—his right side became *Lainingthou* (King of Gods) also known as Atiya Sidaba, and his left side became *Lairembi.* They became the supreme *Pa* and *Pi* (father and mother) for the whole world. These *Pa* and *Pi* had their male and female divine associates also as manifestations of the supreme. This concept of *Pa* and *Pi* is also talked of with reference to the Sky God and the Mother Earth. Their copulation along with the elements of fire, water, and air is supposed to have created human beings.

Another interpretation of the origin myth from an archival Meitei text was given by an RK (Rajkumar, a royal descendant):

Korou (sky) and **Malem** (earth) are the creations of **Taibang Mapu** (the Master of Universe), whom we have earlier referred to as Atingkok. But contrary to the above mentioned versions, Atiya Sidaba, Lainingthou Asiba and Konchin Tingthokpa were the three sons of Taibung Mapu. Atiya Sidaba was assigned the task of creating the universe. Asiba became the source of energy and the creator of

[1] A scholar of the traditional Meitei faith.

twelve months, and Konchin Tingthokpa became Pakhangba, who became the creator of the seven days of the week.

Taibang Mapu showed Atiya Sidaba all the creations by opening his mouth. This opening of the mouth is called *Hayee-Haiya* (one hears these sounds repeatedly in the Lai-Haraoba festivals). Atiya Sidaba felt overwhelmed at this sight, so Taibang Mapu closed his mouth, when Atiya Sidaba jumped out along with the creatures.

The first stage in the creation of the Universe is characterized by *Hung* (the first sound/energy). The formless stage of this sound is called *Irik Konggon*, in its semi-defined form, it is called *Ishang*, and when it becomes very intense and takes a defined form, it is called *Kangi Kanjao*. During these stages *Korou* (sky) was formed. Then, Taibang Mapu threw a net to keep this sky in its place and supported it with three pillars—*Khingnaiba*, *Sanaiba*, and *Menaiba. Ningthou Sidaba* (the main star) and *Thawan Michak* (the other stars) were created around these pillars.

After the creation of the sky, the next stage was the creation of water. The second son, Lainingthou Asiba, was playing in water. His splash in the water created *Shareng* (fish). That is perhaps the reason this particular fish is an essential element in the offerings to the ancestors by all the seven salais. Taibang Mapu entered the water and settled himself there. Atiya Sidaba made *Thengu* (tortoise) and sat on his back, to go deeper into the water to meet Taibang Mapu. Taibang Mapu asked Atiya Sidaba to tie his (Taibang Mapu's) hands behind his back and extract *Malem* (earth) from his navel. It was extracted in a round form and then flattened on top of the tortoise, with the four corners fixed in four directions which were then assigned to the four Lais—*Kari, Kara, Nongdom Khuba,* and *Pishatao.* From the sole of the foot of Asiba, *Ngaprum* (eel fish) was created and given to Atiya Sidaba. Atiya Sidaba rode on it to meet Taibang Mapu, from whom another layer was extracted and spread on *Ngaprum.* Yet a third layer was spread on the body of *Yangoi Shamu* (name of an elephant). The fourth layer, on *Ok* (pig). In this manner, seven layers of the earth were formed. Four *Lais* (gods) were created to support *Malem* (earth) from inside—*Laikhomtao* from the east, *Nongkhomtao* from the north, *Laishatao* from the west and *Nongshatao* from the south. Then Taibang Mapu created two *Lais* out of his two footprints—*Akong Tattaba* (male) and *Achee Tattabee* (female). These two were in turn manifested in seven *Lais* and seven *Lairembis* believed to be the originators of the seven salais. From

the right side of Taibang Mapu, *Acheeba Lai* was created who was assigned to take along the Lais and the Lairembis to take care of *Malem* (earth).

To test the creation of his sons, Taibang Mapu created *Haraba Laithinggai* (who pierces and destroys). Haraba devastated the whole *Malem*.

Atiya Sidaba sent a messenger, *Kobi Til,* to Taibang Mapu to get the *Lairon Mingkhei Laihingnap Nappa* (formula to cure all kinds of illnesses) to reassemble the scattered universe.

In order to help Atiya Sidaba, Taibang Mapu created a Lairembi from his navel, which came out from the left centre corner of his eye called *Tarei Tarei Miyengshel.* She was placed on the tip of his little finger and was named *Nongthang Leima* (Thunder Goddess). Taibang Mapu asked her to control Haraba. Nongthang Leima distracted Haraba's attention by her dance. Some people have also called her *Panthoibi.* (The dance form of Panthoibi is considered to be the origin of the Meitei dance called the Panthoibi Jagoi). In the meantime the two sons of Taibang Mapu, Atiya Sidaba and Asiba, reassembled the universe.

Pakhangba, the younger son of Atiya Sidaba in the earlier interpretation, and the youngest brother of Atiya Sidaba in the last interpretation, started ruling from the centre, Kangla. Initially, he did have to fight for his throne. He had to fight with Poireiton in which the latter was defeated and to end the conflict Pakhangba married Poireiton's sister, Laisana. Poireiton, the king's brother-in-law was considered an immigrant from the west, and was thought to have brought fire to this land, still preserved at Andro[2], that is referred to as the migration-fire of Poireiton.

Origin myths of the Meitei state were also influenced by the ideologies of Hinduism, especially after much of the Meitei population got converted to this faith. According to one such version, the Meiteis claim their descent from Aryan blood, and the name of this state, Manipur, is thought to be mentioned in the *Mahabharata*[3]. According to this myth, Arjuna, the third son of Pandu went to Manipur

[2] A village near the foothills which is known to have preserved the original Meitei faith. Historically, the people of this village are believed to have resisted their conversion to Hinduism and, as a result, were declared outcastes by the king and called '*Lois*'. For details see Chapter 3.

[3] A popular Hindu epic.

on a pilgrimage. He married Chitrangada, the daughter of King Chitrabhanu, the king of Manipur. He returned from Manipur after leaving her and their son, Babrubahana, behind. On his second visit, Arjuna was defeated in a battle by his own son and only later discovered this. To strengthen this version, the first celebrated 'Vaishnav' king, Garibniwaz[4] who was earlier known as Pamheiba, composed a chronicle, 'Bijoy Panchali', in which he said that this land was first known as Arya Nagar, then as Mekhala, and then as Manipur. The king who ruled Arya Nagar was Ananta, who was the forefather of King Chitrabhanu. A daughter, Chitrangada, was born to this king after great devotion to Lord Shiva. According to the chronicle, the daughter was said to have worshipped Lord Shiva and prayed to have Arjuna as her husband.

The seven clans of the valley became the seven gotras of the Hindus. The seven celestial sages [Saptarishi] believed to be the seven ancestors of the Brahmins became the ancestors of the seven clans; Angom became Kaushika gotra, Ningthouja became Shandilya, Luwang became Kashyapa, Khuman was called Maudgalya, Khaba-Nganba became Naimisya, Moirang was named Atreya and Chenglei was given the name Bharadwaja.

What had been a clan dynasty until then started showing signs of Brahminical hierarchy, and then a lot of fusion between the indigenous culture and the outside Hindu culture took place. It is very interesting to note that inspite of so much of coercion and assimilation of Hinduism one sees only traces of its influence in Meitei society. All the seven clans continue to be known by their indigenous names, the kings whose names were changed to Hindu names are remembered by their original names, barring one or two e.g., Garib-niwaz (though Garib-niwaz are Urdu words) and Bhagyachandra, who were both deeply influenced by Hinduism. Indigenous names, ancestral deities, festivals, and faith, especially in crises, are still deeply embedded in their traditional religion. The essence of kingship is still seen in Pakhangba. A detailed analysis of all these elements will of course be dealt with in subsequent chapters. But I must state here that though Hinduism has made significant contributions to Manipuri culture, it is followed only as a way of life. It was intro-

[4] He ruled in the eighteenth century (1709–48) and was the first king to establish Hinduism as a state religion. He was influenced by the Ramanandi sect which was introduced to him by a Brahmin from Bengal called Shantidas.

duced as an official, state religion with certain guidelines and it has remained an official religion with many external symbols such as the *Chandan tilak*[5], the particular aura of formality as cast around the Kang Jatra[6] and the Holi festival carrying its mark.[7]

The Reigns of the Meitei Kings

There are certain outstanding features of the regimes of various Meitei kings remembered by the people which need to be mentioned.

Nongda Lairen Pakhangba

Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, (AD 33–154) the first historical king, is remembered as the conqueror, since it was he who subjugated the other clans under his rule. Pakhangba was the title given to him, because he was considered the ideal king. He also set up *Kacha* (male court) of which he himself became the head and also *Pacha* (female court) and made his wife Laisana its head. Another prominent thing, for which he is known, is having divided the land into four *Pannas* (administrative units): *Ahallup, Naharup, Laipham,* and *Khabam.*

Khuyoitompok

Khuyoitompok his son, (AD 154–264) was the Meitei *Piba* (chief). He introduced the concept and class of nobility. He created 64 posts of *Phamdoms* (nobles), two advisory institutions under the control of *Phathi* (learned men), introduced the post of *Keirungba* (in charge of the royal godown), the post of *Leikai Lakpa* (to look after the localities), and the post of *Ningol Lakpa* (teachers for royal maidens).

Naokhamba

Naokhamba's regime (AD 411–428) saw the word *Ningthou* (king) introduced for the first time, taking the place of Piba chief. This

[5] An elongated sandalwood mark on the forehead, sometimes along with prints of Hindu incantations.

[6] A huge chariot with the images of Lord Krishna in the form of Jagannath accompanied by his brother Balbhadra and sister Sumitra, is taken out in a huge and spectacular procession (see photographs in the Appendix and Chapter 5).

[7] Celebration of *Vasant* (spring), by enacting the games played by the divine couple—Radha and Krishna, and singing of *bhajans* (religious songs) in their praise (See Chapter 5).

indicates the transition from a clan structure to a state structure, where the 'chief of a clan' became the head of all the seven clans. This was a terminological addition that signified a status higher than that of the term 'chief'

Naophangba

Naophangba (AD 428–518) is remembered for his emphasis on ethics. His dictum was that the *Kanglei Meitei Leima* (the chief queen) should not at any point make two contradictory statements and the king should not make two decisions for any one case. Both justice and discipline should be maintained. Whenever the *Maichou*s (the learned) learnt of something said about the king or the nobles, they were to inform the king. The hands of thieves were to be cut off. Those with an evil eye on the king's wife were to be blinded. Those involved in treason were to be killed.

Naothingkhong

Naothingkhong (AD 663–763) had nine wives out of whom three did not have any children. In a famous legend known as *Naothingkhong Phambal Kaba* (Coronation of Naothingkhong), his encounters in various regions, starting with the Langmais in the eastern hills, and with the Khumans, the Moirangs, and the Luwangs in the valley are described. However, he is also shown to have been brought up from childhood by his parents-in-law along with his wife Pitanga Liklu Laithibi among the Langmais. He is said to have had to escape to the Khuman land, because of the anger of the Langmais who were slaughtered in a surprise attack by the Meitei king *Ura Konthouba*, the father of Naothingkhong. Later, the Khuman king, foreseeing the bright future of the 'boy'[8] offered his daughter, and so did the Moirang king. The legend does not mention the rest of the queens. After his travels he is said to have been called back by the Meitei king who, judging him to be the ablest, made him his successor. Thus Naothingkhong became the eleventh king of the Ningthouja dynasty. This legend throws light on the relationship of interaction, intermarriage, as also opposition between the plains and hill people.

According to one 80-year old, knowledgeable respondent who claimed to be a descendant from the maternal line of Garibniwaz,

[8] He is said to have been addressed as a boy by the Khuman king in the legend.

the power of the king depended upon his personality. The king used to consult his nobles once every twenty days. He was capable of forcing his will as long as he did not go against social custom and convention. In consultation with the nobles, he used to award the *Tangbal Loi,* the highest title of the land to a warrior who had the capacity to arrest 100 enemies.

Pongba Tara or *Ningthou Ngamba Angamba*

Pongba Tara or *Ningthou Ngamba Angamba* (ten old men with great knowledge) were appointed by the king. The post was not hereditary. They were more popular with the people than the king and were also called *Leiching Purel* (one who pulled the people).

Nongthomba (prime minister) was the head of the revenue department and the royal treasury and had the power to pass judgement in civil cases.

Pukhramba was in-charge of food and supplies.

Khurailakpa (*Khurai*—a particular region, *lakpa*—leader) was responsible for maintaining law and order within *Khurai* by keeping watch over delinquent youths. He also acted as the guardian of social customs and conventions.

Shanglen Lakpas were heads of the four *Pannas* (administrative units). Out of these four, two were made part of the *Ningthou Pongba Tara* (ten learned nobles) according to seniority of age.

Chongkhanba Hanjaba was responsible for selecting umbrellas of different kinds for the kings, deities, and senior dignitaries. The leaders of the seven clans had different coloured umbrellas.[9] He had to check to see which of the officials and relatives of the king were entitled to sit on the red carpet, which on the *chadar*, and which on cushions.

Piba, or the head of the clan, besides having physical strength and a knowledgeable mind, also had to fulfil the criterion of not being born of the remarriage of a widow or a widower or of a foreigner father or mother.[10] Kingship was not always hereditary. Any

[9] The implied meaning of particular colours being assigned to each of the clans will be discussed in Chapter 3.

[10] An important indication of the importance given to the criterion of descent.

powerful man within the Ningthouja clan could become the king. He had to be capable of receiving respect and veneration from the people. The council of ministers were the king makers. They were also the intermediary link between the king and the people and were much more popular with the people than the king himself.

These were some of the elements of history as recollected by old people. It was narrated from the knowledge that was passed on from generation to generation, and from their own experience and perception of the rule of these kings. The most talked about ruler was King *Garibniwaz* (whose indigenous name was Pamheiba). This could probably be because it was during his reign, that the history of Manipur changed its course. It was he who established Hinduism as a state religion. At the same time, he was deeply influenced by Naga customs. He also seemed to have brought about a certain degree of order in society. He is venerated as the most able and powerful ruler who is thought to have crushed many tribal rebellions.

An RK, who belongs to the eighth generation from Garibniwaz, recounted all the rebellions against the king along with the dates.

Guerilla warfare was the native Manipuri style of fighting. Garibniwaz conquered territory upto the capital of Burma using this style.

Tangkhul Naga Singsong rose to power against the king, but it was suppressed and the Tangkhul brought *Mithun* (buffalo), and goats as presents to show regrets. In 1733 the hill tribes of Hundung launched an attack against the Meiteis and Garibniwaz's troops under the command of Thangsana Cheksa crushed and subdued the attack. The Maring tribe of Khongkhang revolted in 1746 and was subdued by the king himself and he brought 120 of them as prisoners. In 1745 the Sompu tribe had risen against the Meiteis and killed 7 persons and in the same year the Kabuis attacked and killed 105 men. But they were also brought under control.

We are mentioning the numbers of captives, names, and the years in detail to show how much a Manipuri keeps track of the important events in the lives or reigns of their favourite kings.

On asking about the king's rule, I was told that the punishment for wrong doings was very harsh and that there was absolute peace in the kingdom. 'A lot of attention was paid to arts and culture. The *Sana pala* (Royal Concert) used to perform regularly at the palace.' According to him, people could settle anywhere they pleased but

sometimes it used to cause trouble. The king punished anyone who ventured to disobey the royal orders. Death was the ultimate punishment. There is a place called *Langthambi* at *Terakeithel*, where the criminals and offenders were put to death. 'Compared to this, the present day administration is rather mild.' People who married someone with whom the relationship was considered incest were declared impure. They were sent to *Haojongband*, where they were not killed, but were simply ex-communicated.

As regards the present day political and insurgency related problems, he however, refrained from commenting lest it may be misunderstood.

It is believed that it was King Garibniwaz who opened the doors of Manipur to the outside world by linking it to pan-Hindu (Vaishnav) culture. He reigned from AD 1709–1748. He was exiled by his second son *Chitsai*. Chitsai was later defeated by his elder brother *Shyamsai* who then became the ruler. During Garibniwaz's reign, all the 64 *Phamdoms* (nobles) seemed to have lost their power, and only the sons and relatives of the king were appointed to the royal post. The Brahmin scribes, theologians, priests, and ritual functionaries had started marking their presence from the fifteenth century onwards. From the time of King *Kyamba*[11] a gradual infiltration of Hindu religious ideas had begun. During the reign of Kyamba in the fifteenth century, a Burmese king belonging to the Shan dynasty presented an idol of Vishnu to cement their relationship.[12] This idol was placed in a temple constructed in Bishnupur.[13] It is believed that the present name of this place was given after the temple of Vishnu was constructed. It was formerly known as Lamangdong. *King Charairongba* (1697–1709) was the first to be converted to the Vaishnav faith. *Garibniwaz* or *Pamheiba* (1709–1748) was the first convert to Gauriya Vaishnavism, who made Hinduism a state religion. He was also the first to assume the title of *Maharaja*.

King Charairongba, father of Garibniwaz, was told by a Meitei priest that if 'a son was born to him, he would be a curse on the

[11] It can also be noticed from the gradual change from traditional Meitei names to Hindu Brahmanical names. The change is clearly evident from the genealogies of all the clans.

[12] Cementing the bond was necessary since before that there used to be recurrent fights between Burma and Manipur.

[13] About 45 km away from Imphal.

king'. When the queen delivered a son, the news was hidden from the king and the son was set afloat on the river in a basket. A Thangal Naga chief spotted the child and took him to his village and brought him up.[14] (see Chapter 3 also.)

There is a major controversy about whether Garibniwaz was a Naga or a Meitei. In a paper submitted to the fifth meeting of the Indian Historical Records Commission of the Government of India, at Calcutta, in 1923, A.F.M. Abdul Ali claimed that, in AD 1714 a Naga named Pamheiba became the Raja of Manipur. We have already mentioned that Pamheiba was another name for Garibniwaz. His contention may also have been borne out of the fact that Garibniwaz's period is known for very close and harmonious relations between the hills and the valley. Garibniwaz, like earlier rulers, ascended the throne[15] in a Naga costume. For his investiture ceremony a large number of tribal chiefs were invited. They were also invited for feasts with the Maharaja.

The King as A Concept

'What happened when a king died?' We asked one RK. According to him, the first thing that was required to be done was to name the new king before the old king's cremation. All the people, the nobility as well as the common folk, were expected to clean their cooking utensils and the floors of their houses. Once this was done the dead king was cremated. All the coronated kings were cremated in Kangla.[16] If the king was killed in the course of a rebellion, and if the leader of such a rebellion was an RK, he would become the king. He may, therefore, not necessarily be the king's own child. If he had died issueless, one among the RKs would become king, selected by the nobles. The king, it was thought was always afraid of the possibility of a rebellion, and the RKs it was thought, always kept a close watch on the king. 'We were always ready for a war, for a rebellion. It is we who should lead the people and revolt against the king, if the king

[14] According to historian R.K. Jhalajit Singh, Garibniwaz was removed immediately after his birth to *Uchiwa*, a Meitei village in the plains from where his mother hailed.

[15] Ascending the throne is called *Phambal kaba* in the Manipuri language.

[16] The traditional capital of the Ningthouja (Meitei) kings.

becomes unjust.' But there was a code even for rebellion. If the rebellion started at night, the rebels had to enter the palace the same night. If this was not done, then the RK leading it was not a 'qualified' rebel. 'So he will be rejected or punished by the people. But this attempt will come to the knowledge of the king and he will be extra-cautious, and no, he (the rebel) cannot apologize to the people.' He had to face the consequences of his failure to become the king. According to him, Manipur kings were not very rich. They always had to maintain store houses for food and grains to feed themselves, as well as the people during calamities. If the nobles and the RKs had started to starve then 'they could always influence around 5,000 people' to revolt against the king. And the king always feared such a situation.

This description is somewhat in contradiction to what I said earlier, that the Manipuri kings were believed to be manifestations of the first mythical king, *Pakhangba*, blessed with his divine powers.

It seems that the king is viewed as somebody who is divine and at the same time, as a mundane human being with all the usual human weaknesses.

The Manipuri word for king is *Ningthou*. The Meiteis distinguish it from *piba* which means head of the kin group. In the past, the heads of politically weaker clans—the Chenglei and Khaba Nganba were called piba while the Angom, Luwang, Khuman and Moirang clans used the term Ningthou, but prefixed another word *Phamdou* to it. Perhaps, this implied the heads of regional areas. The term Ningthou was only used for referring to the Meitei head, who subsequently became the head of all seven clans.[17]

The word piba seems to invoke the concept of a fraternity, since the man who holds this office is himself a member of the kin group of which he is the head. Sometimes the first historical king Nongda Lairen Pakhangba was also referred to as a 'piba' of the *mayum taret ki piba* (seven houses). The use of such a phrase might have been deliberate so as to build a kin network between all the seven clans, so that all members could feel part of the Meitei 'family', and recognize the Meitei king as the head of their family. The kingdom was perceived as an enlarged family, where members had their autonomy

[17] Note the strict application of terms of address based on descent. I have discussed in detail the terminological distinction based on descent in Chapter 6.

Symbol of Pakhangba: the creation and destruction

and yet were at the same time subsumed under one umbrella term, the *Meiteis*. The fact that this society has been built upon a family structure as its base, comes out clearly in the next chapter.

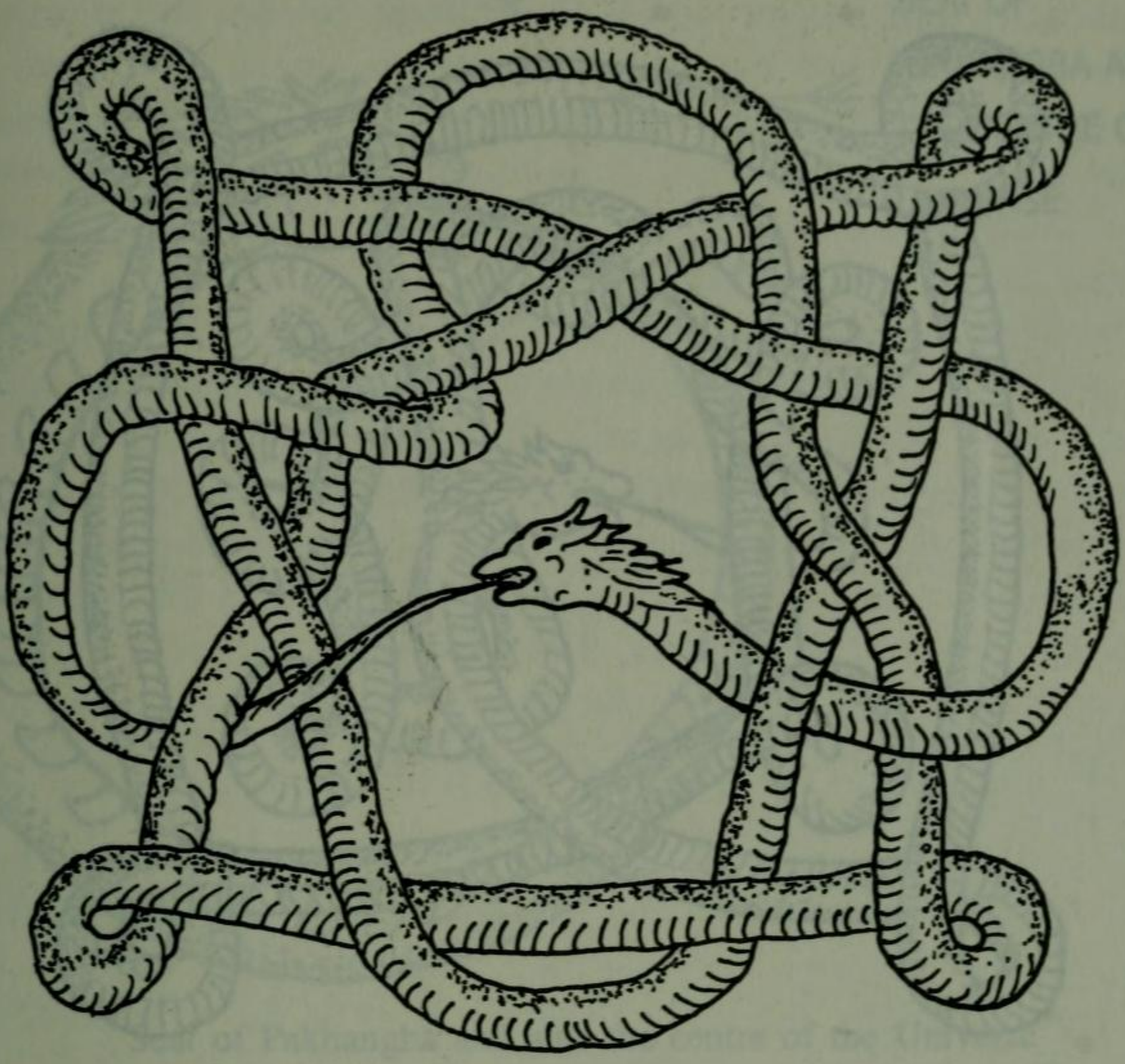
Nongda Lairen Pakhangba is the epitome of Meitei kingship. He is the model of kingship in the minds of every Meitei. All the later kings are identified as the descendants of this model king, inheriting both his blood and qualities. He is considered the last king of the 'celestial age'. He is perceived as the human image of divinity formed for the purpose of creating and governing the social world. On the other hand, he is also identified as the first human king. Celestial and human attributes are conjoined in this personality. This is described in the phrase '*Nungthil Lai Oiba Numidang Mi Oiba*' (appearing as a deity in the day and human being at night). Thus the power of Pakhangba was marked by contradiction; being divine yet at the same time, being subject to the certainty of death, whether in the physical or symbolic sense, by his enemy, frequently one who was a kinsman. The kingdom emerged as the result of a balanced

harmony of two contrary forces.[18] The symbol of Pakhangba in the form of a snake biting its own tail, portrays this balance between creation and destruction.

The physical world is guarded by four directional deities, namely *Thangjing* on the south-west, *Koubru* on the north-west, *Marjing* on the north-east, and *Wangbaren* on the south-east, identified with the four hills in these directions. Kangla is the nodal point and the most sacred space. Pakhangba is believed to sit on this central point, protected and guarded by these four directional deities. It was believed that all the successive kings who were coronated at this place could really sit on the throne only if they were capable rulers, otherwise Pakhangba who was still protecting this place, sitting under the surface of the earth on which the throne stands would burn the king with his heat.[19] Kangla is still venerated and considered most sacred by the people of Manipur. The four directional deities are worshipped by the people to invoke protection from all kinds of calamities. They are believed to be still protecting the Meitei state. The most common divine symbol of Pakhangba is in the form of a snake. This snake is most commonly symbolized with his tail inside his mouth since the world begins and ends with him and the snake's body is coiled on all the four corners representing the four directional deities. These divine symbols are called *Paaphans*. The directional deities, also suggest the arrangement of territorial boundaries. Another pattern of this snake formation represents eight directions, including the four main directions, i.e., north, east, south, west, and south-east, north-east, south-west and north-west. These directions take into account the terrain of space between every two directions. Each of these minor divisions is called *Shungdai*. These together define the terrain of

[18] Pakhangba in this sense can be seen also as a mediator between the divine and the mundane. Perhaps Levi Strauss' contention of *binary* opposites and mediator gets another example. He can be defined as a *liminal* category, neither fully divine nor fully mundane and hence a symbol of awe as well as veneration as has been applied by Mary Douglas in her work *Purity and Danger*, Penguin, 1970.

[19] It was believed that the *throne* which was constantly being heated by Pakhangba's fiery breath was a very uncomfortable place and only those kings who were ready to endure this discomfiture could rule for a long time. Hence, the difficulty in looking after the kingdom was symbolically portrayed through the discomfiture of the throne.



Paaphan depicting eight-cornered universe with Pakhangba in the centre

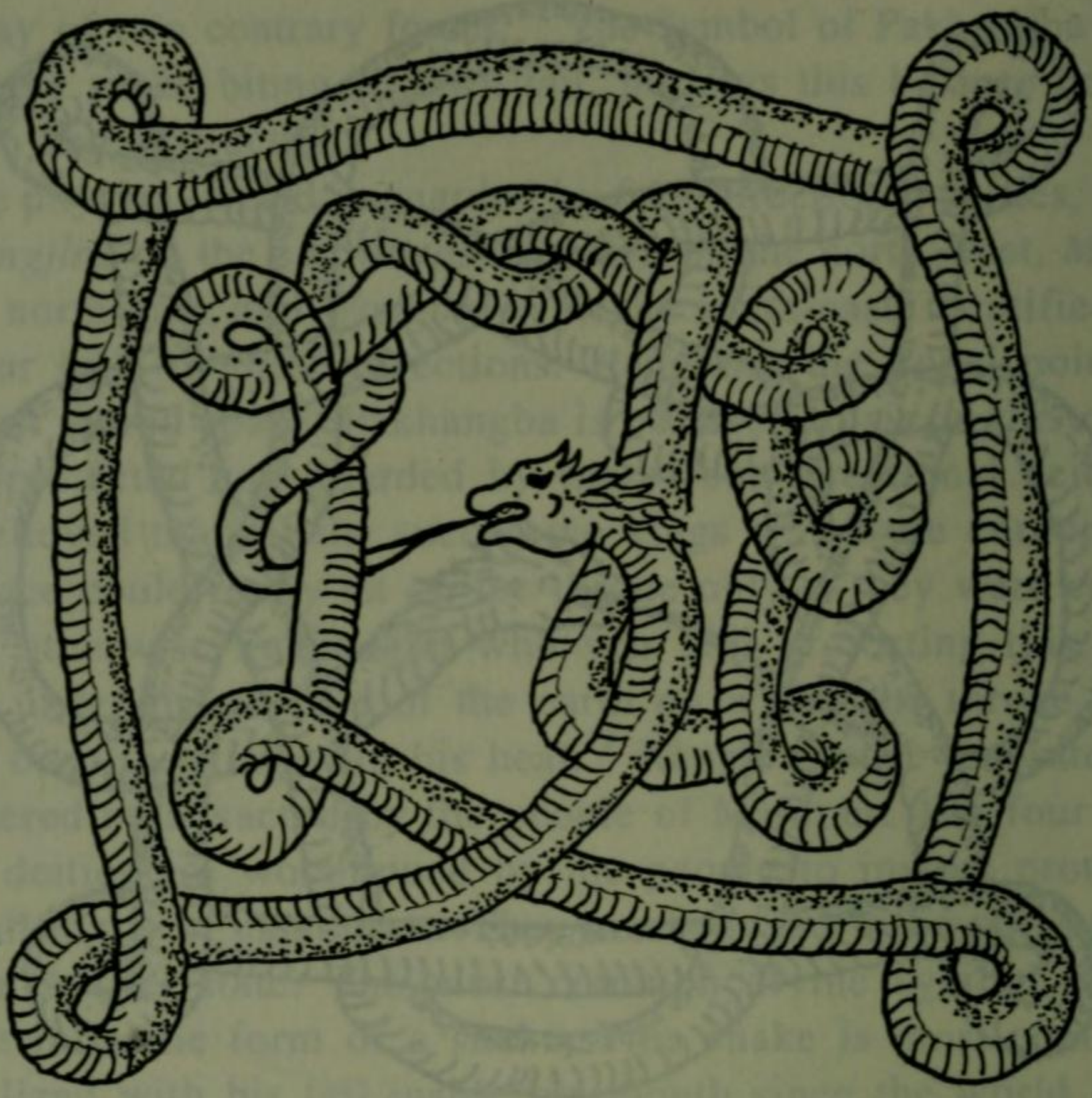
the territorial boundary of this state. Offerings of any kind to these deities are always made in odd numbers and offerings in an even number are considered inauspicious as it is considered related to death.[20]

The symbolism of even and odd numbers, the sacredness of different directions, and the sessonality of Pakhangba (the creator and protector of man), and his origin myth connects cosmology to the state structure and forms the basis of the prescribed norms for the whole social structure. These elements and their relationships are discussed in detail in the forthcoming chapters.

During the course of the interviews with the head priest, Pundit Achouba,[21] I was shown many manuscripts depicting Pakhangba in

[20] I realized this when I went to a traditional priestess' (maibi's) house and was expected to offer a bunch of bananas as part of our offering. It was then that a bunch containing an odd number of bananas was given to me by the fruit vendor after I specified that it was for offering to the deities.

[21] The chief priest belonging to the traditional Meitei faith.

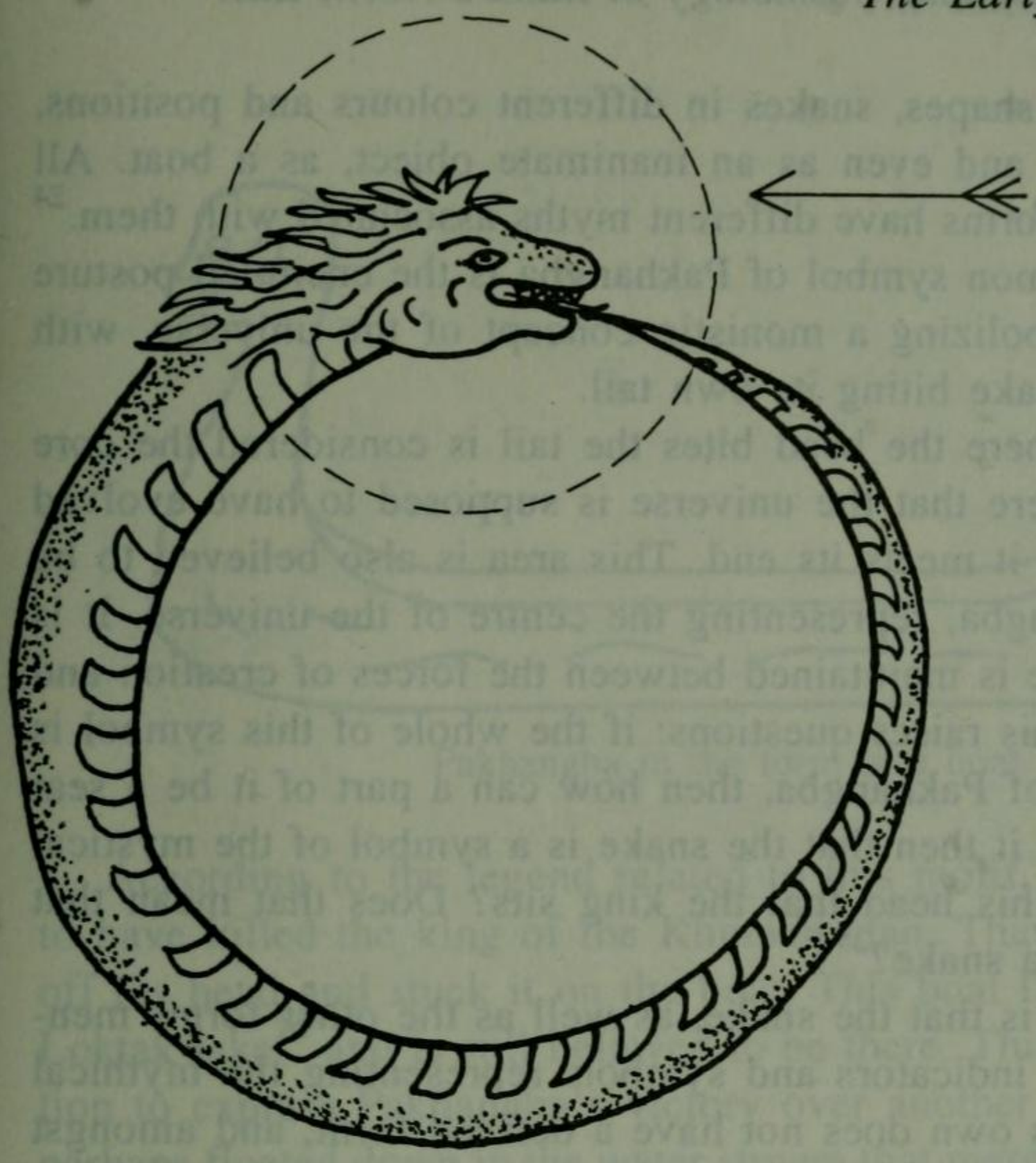


Paaphan depicting four-cornered universe with Pakhangba in the centre

various forms and postures. So many icons are depicted that one starts wondering about the identity of Pakhangba. Is he the first king, or the creator of man? Is he a snake or a collective symbol for all the seven clans? And, is he a representation of the territorial boundary or a symbolic representation of time?

Pakhangba is recorded as the first king in *Cheitharol Kumbaba* (the royal chronicle). According to this chronicle, Pakhangba arrived in Manipur during the period of successive migrations that are associated with Poireiton who is believed to have led migrations from the west.[22] Poireiton wandered through the hills of Manipur to seek a place free of death and disease. He failed in this quest and himself succumbed to illness. He is also thought to have fought Pakhangba unsuccessfully to gain the throne. He is referred to as *Ibudhou* ['great

[22] The relationship between Pakhangba and Poireiton is discussed in Chapter 6.



Seat of Pakhangba and also the centre of the Universe

grandfather'] and is considered to be the originator of the Luwang clan.

Pakhangba gained the throne and ruled for 120 years (33–158 AD). He married Poireiton's sister, Laisana (literally meaning golden goddess, some claim that she was Poireiton's daughter). This act cemented the relationship between him and his rival (Poireiton). The historical records portray him as the founding father of the Ningthouja clan. The snake symbol accords Pakhangba with his divine character.

An imaginary source (pond) of water called *Nungcheng*, in the heart of Kangla, the original palace of the king, is considered to be the abode of Pakhangba.

According to Pundit Achouba, who showed me the manuscript,[23] where various forms of Pakhangba were illustrated, Pakhangba changes his form daily, thus he has 365 forms. These include dragons of

[23] He claims it to be the original one which he brought from Cachar where his ancestors had fled with King Chaurajit.

various sizes and shapes, snakes in different colours and positions, wild boar, crows, and even as an inanimate object, as a boat. All these shapes and forms have different myths associated with them.[24]

The most common symbol of Pakhangba is the encircled posture of the snake symbolizing a monistic concept of the universe, with the head of the snake biting its own tail.

The portion where the head bites the tail is considered the core area, since it is here that the universe is supposed to have evolved and it is here that it meets its end. This area is also believed to be the seat of Pakhangba, representing the centre of the universe. It is here that a balance is maintained between the forces of creation and destruction. But this raises questions: if the whole of this symbol is one of the forms of Pakhangba, then how can a part of it be a seat of its own self? Is it then that the snake is a symbol of the mystical king and it is on his head that the king sits? Does that mean that Pakhangba is not a snake?[25]

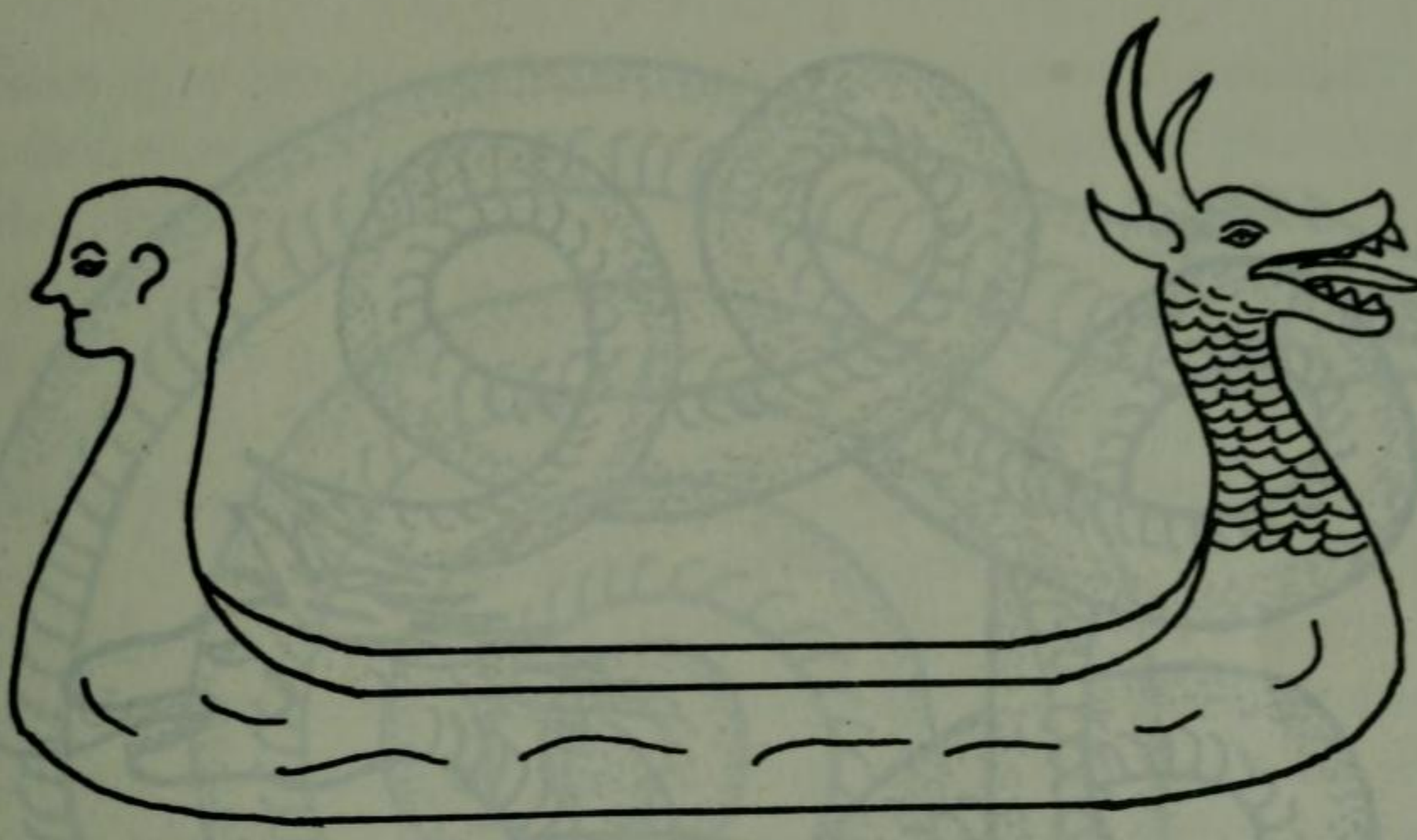
My contention is that the snake, as well as the other forms mentioned before, are indicators and symbols representing the mythical being, who, on his own does not have a defined form, and amongst these representations, the snake form seems to be the most popularly used symbol representing Pakhangba.

This contention was further strengthened when Pundit Achouba stated that only a person as knowledgeable as him could interpret the meaning and position of these different representations, and that it is only through prescribed rituals for each representation and form that Pakhangba can be appeased. I will try to develop this argument while discussing the meaning of different symbols.

One of the motifs in the manuscript shows Pakhangba in the form of a boat, one end of which is in the shape of the head of the snake and the other end with a human face representing the head of a human being.

[24] Incidentally, I was told not to take any pictures of these forms, otherwise something untoward would befall me, and if I was very keen to take photographs I had to perform certain rituals and only on particular auspicious times for each form. Only then could I take the pictures. Thus, I decided to draw some of the selected icons myself in rough sketches.

[25] Saroj Nalini Parratt in her book, *Religion of Manipur*, states that Pakhangba is the 'snake god'.



Pakhangba in the form of a boat

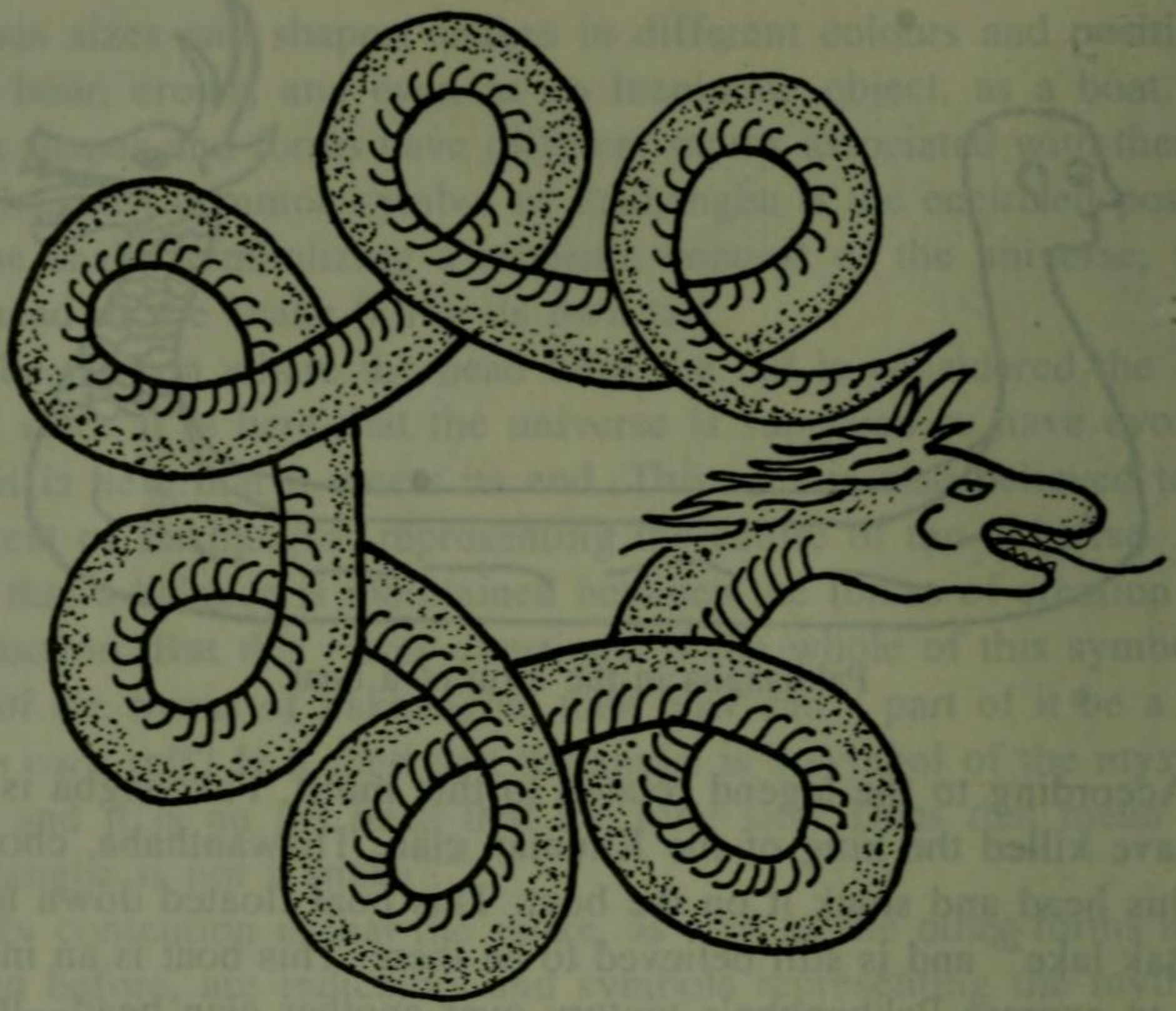
According to the legend related to this motif, Pakhangba is said to have killed the king of the Khuman clan, Thawanthaba, chopped off his head and stuck it on the boat. This boat floated down to the Loktak lake[26] and is still believed to be there. This boat is an indication to express Pakhangba's victory over another clan head—it was perhaps floated down in the water stream that merged with the Loktak lake as an announcement to the people. It was thus a symbolic representation of Pakhangba rather than Pakhangba himself.

Different areas rely on different forms/representations of Pakhangba. When calamity occurs in a particular area, the ritual for appeasement is conducted with reference to only that particular form. If any other ritual prescribed for other areas or forms is performed, it is believed to bring disaster to that area.

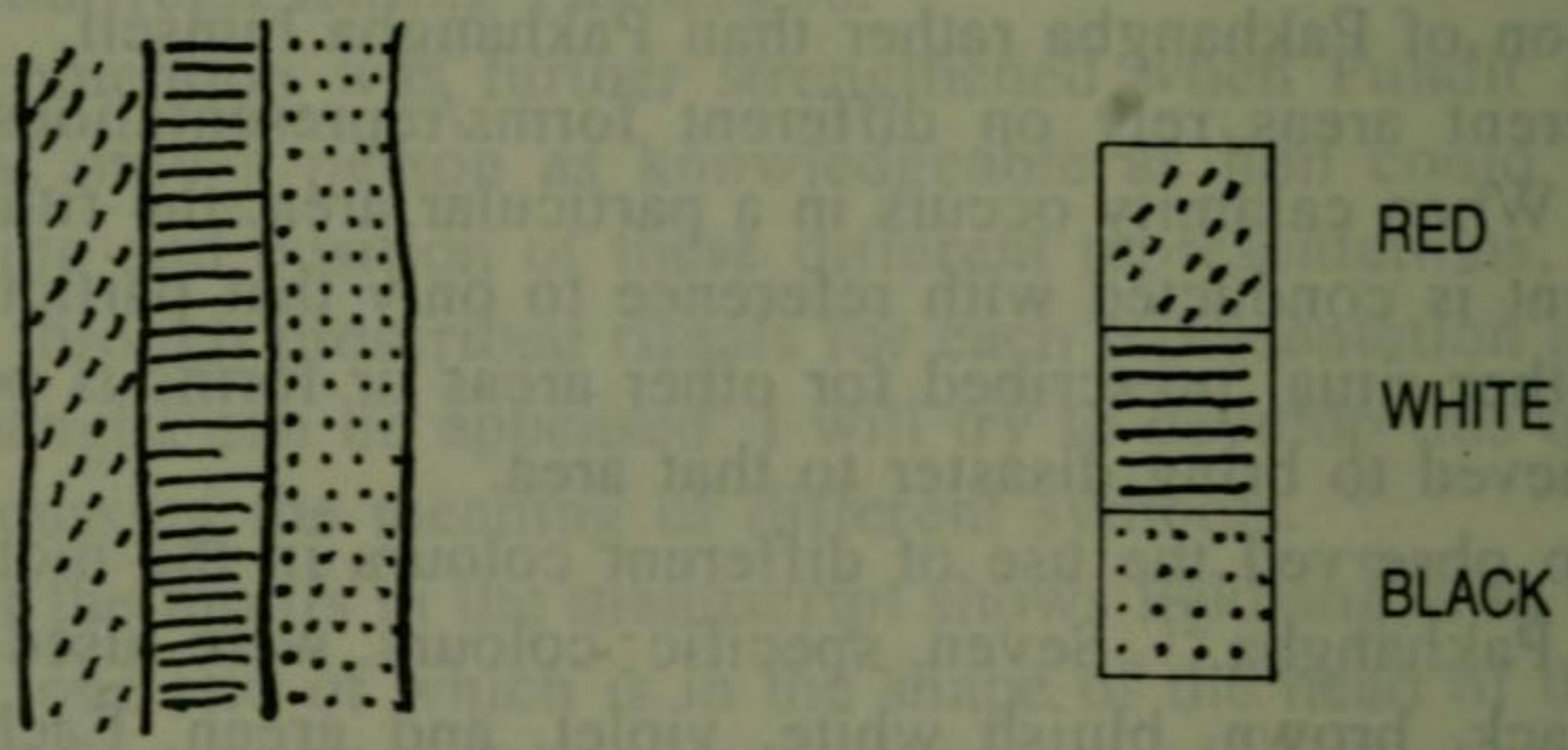
I also observed the use of different colours in the motifs representing Pakhangba.[27] Seven specific colours were used—reddish gold, black, brown, bluish white, violet, and green. Each specific colour, we were told, signified each of the seven clans. Reddish yellow was the symbol of the Ningthouja/Mangang/Meitei clan, black was the colour of the Khuman clan, the Luwang clan was represented

[26] A vast natural lake on the southern side of the state in the Moirang principality, now the Bishnupur District. (See the map of Manipur given in the first chapter.)

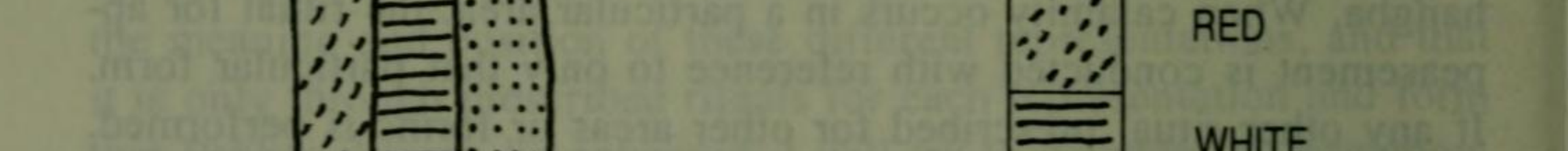
[27] The colour association was observed when I was going through an ancient text with the drawings of different representations of Pakhangba. This text is in the possession of Pundit Achouba, the Chief Meitei priest. The associated temperament of each colour was given by him.



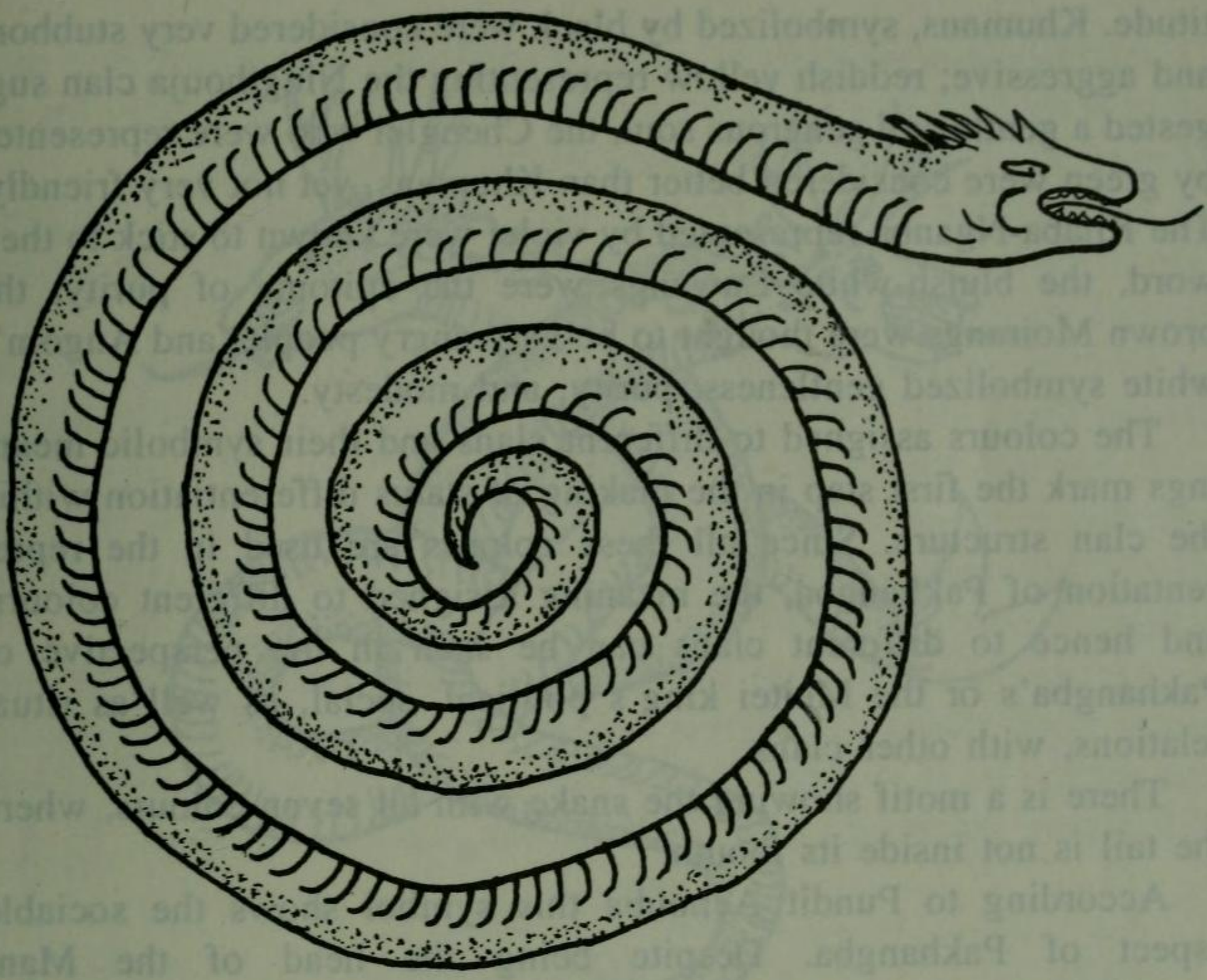
Pakhangba where the tail is not inside his mouth



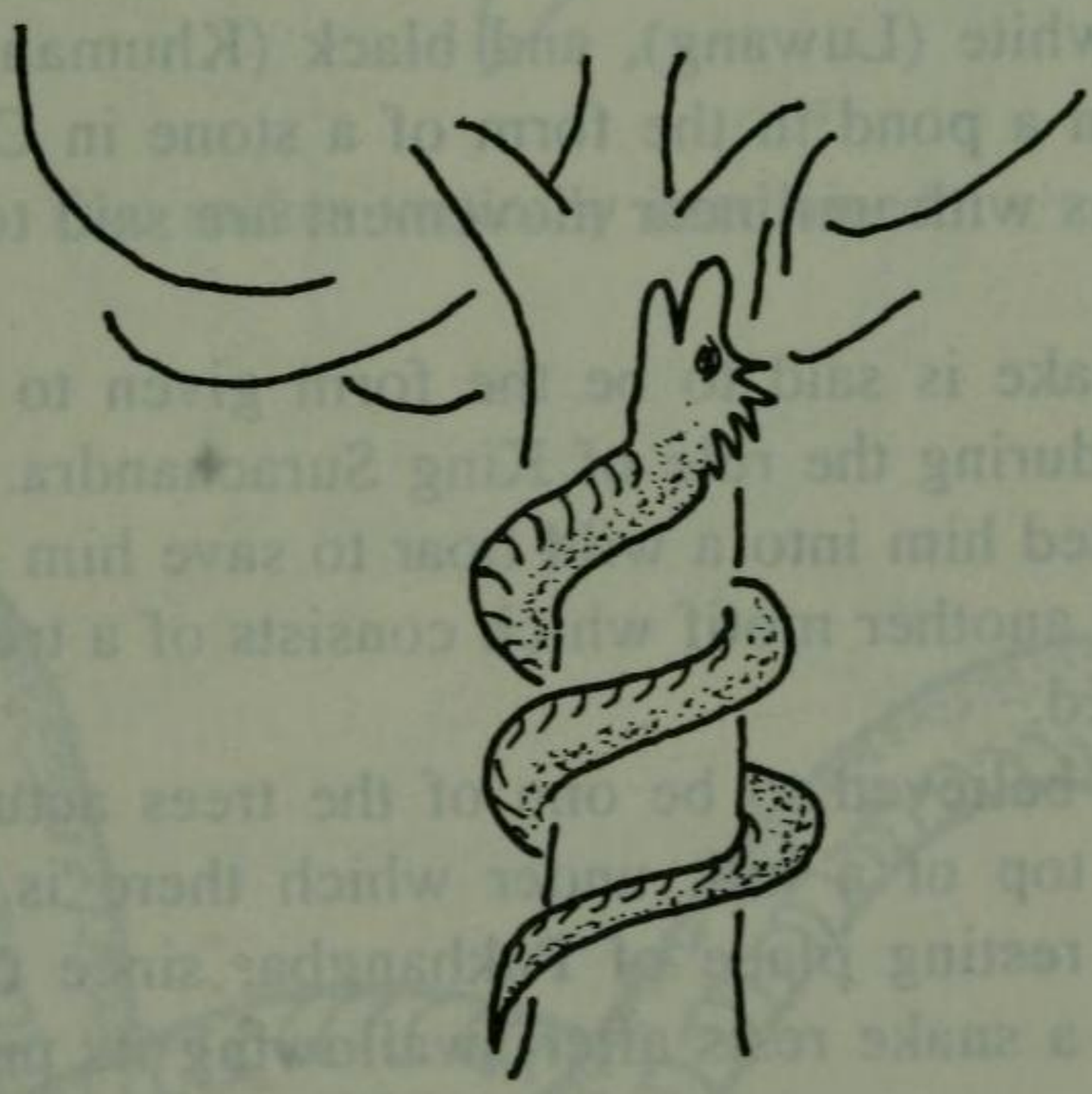
Pakhangba in the form of a stone



Small snake representing small areas



A coiled snake



A snake coiled around a tree

by bluish-white, white signified the Angom clan, Khaba Nganba was represented by violet, the Moirangs, by brown and Chenglei, by green. This colour symbolism was based on each clan's behaviour and at-

titude. Khumans, symbolized by black were considered very stubborn and aggressive; reddish yellow representing the Ningthouja clan suggested a gentle and generous soul, the Chenglei who were represented by green were considered better than Khumans, yet not very friendly. The Khaba-Nganba represented by violet were known to stick to their word, the bluish-white Luwangs were the epitome of purity, the brown Moirangs were thought to be very angry people, and Angom's white symbolized gentleness, purity, and modesty.

The colours assigned to different clans and their symbolic meanings mark the first step in the making of status differentiation within the clan structure. Since all these colours are used in the representation of Pakhangba, the meaning assigned to different colours, and hence to different clans can be seen in the perspective of Pakhangba's or the Meitei king's political, social, as well as ritual relations, with other clans.

There is a motif showing the snake with all seven colours, where the tail is not inside its mouth.

According to Pundit Achouba this symbol shows the sociable aspect of Pakhangba. Despite being the head of the Mangang/Ningthouja clan, he bears responsibility for all the clans. The usage of many colours represents the merging of the different clans. Another symbol consisting of three horizontal lines in red (Ningthouja), white (Luwang), and black (Khuman) colours is said to be located in a pond in the form of a stone in Canchipur.[28]

Small snakes with unilinear movement are said to represent small areas.

A coiled snake is said to be the form given to Senapati Angou by Pakhangba during the rule of King Surachandra. Later he is said to have converted him into a wild boar to save him from the enemy.

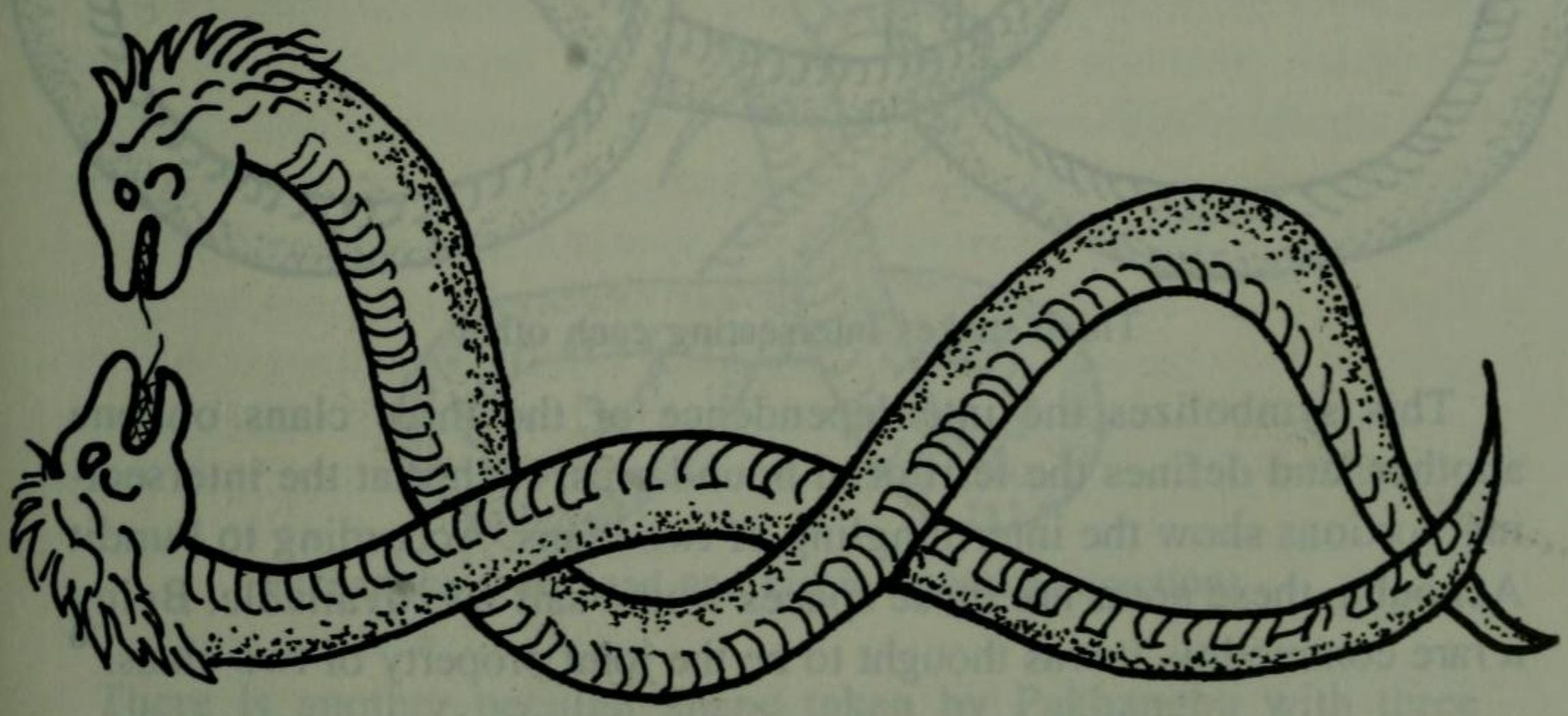
There is yet another motif which consists of a tree, around which a snake is coiled.

This tree is believed to be one of the trees actually standing in Leimatak[29] on top of a hill, under which there is a cave. This is considered the resting place of Pakhangba, since coiling around a tree is the way a snake rests after swallowing its prey.

[28] Gambhir Singh made this place his capital for some time. In present times Manipur University is located in this area. It is on the national highway which connects Manipur to Burma (Myanmar).

[29] A part of the Loktak lake.

Two snakes vertically intertwined



Two snakes intertwined horizontally

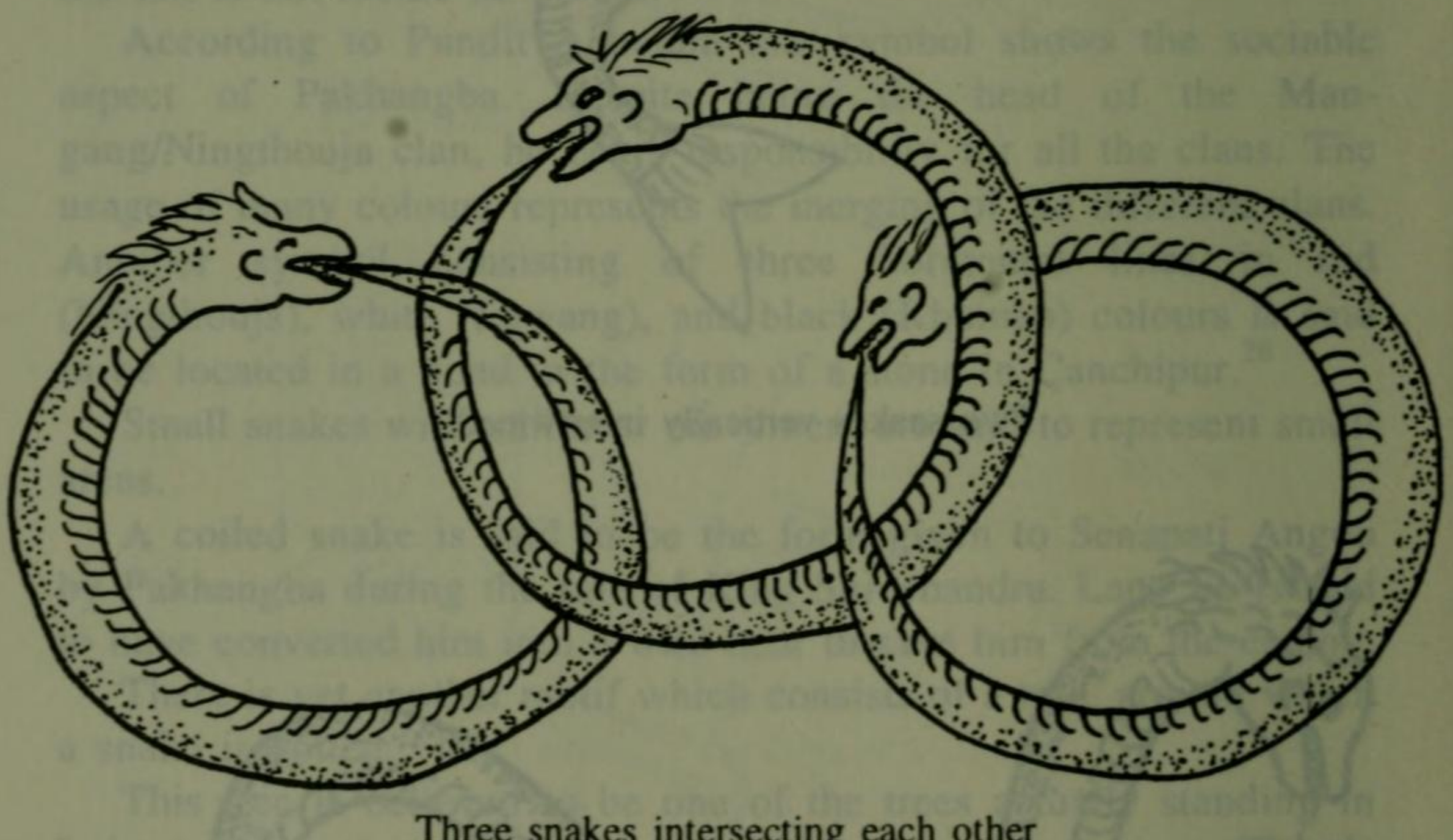
Another icon portrays two snakes vertically intertwined with each other with their faces in opposite directions—this is a symbol for the protection of two opposite directions, at the same time.

Another one shows two snakes intertwined horizontally. The position of their heads shows the particular time period that is considered auspicious for embarking upon any task or activity.

Besides snakes, Pakhangba is also represented through a crow-dragon like form, with the body of a crow and the face of a dragon.

It has two variations. The one with horns, feet and wings, is the one that is thought to fly at night, to protect people from evil; the second has no feet and slightly resembles a crocodile; it is meant to safeguard people from evil inside water.

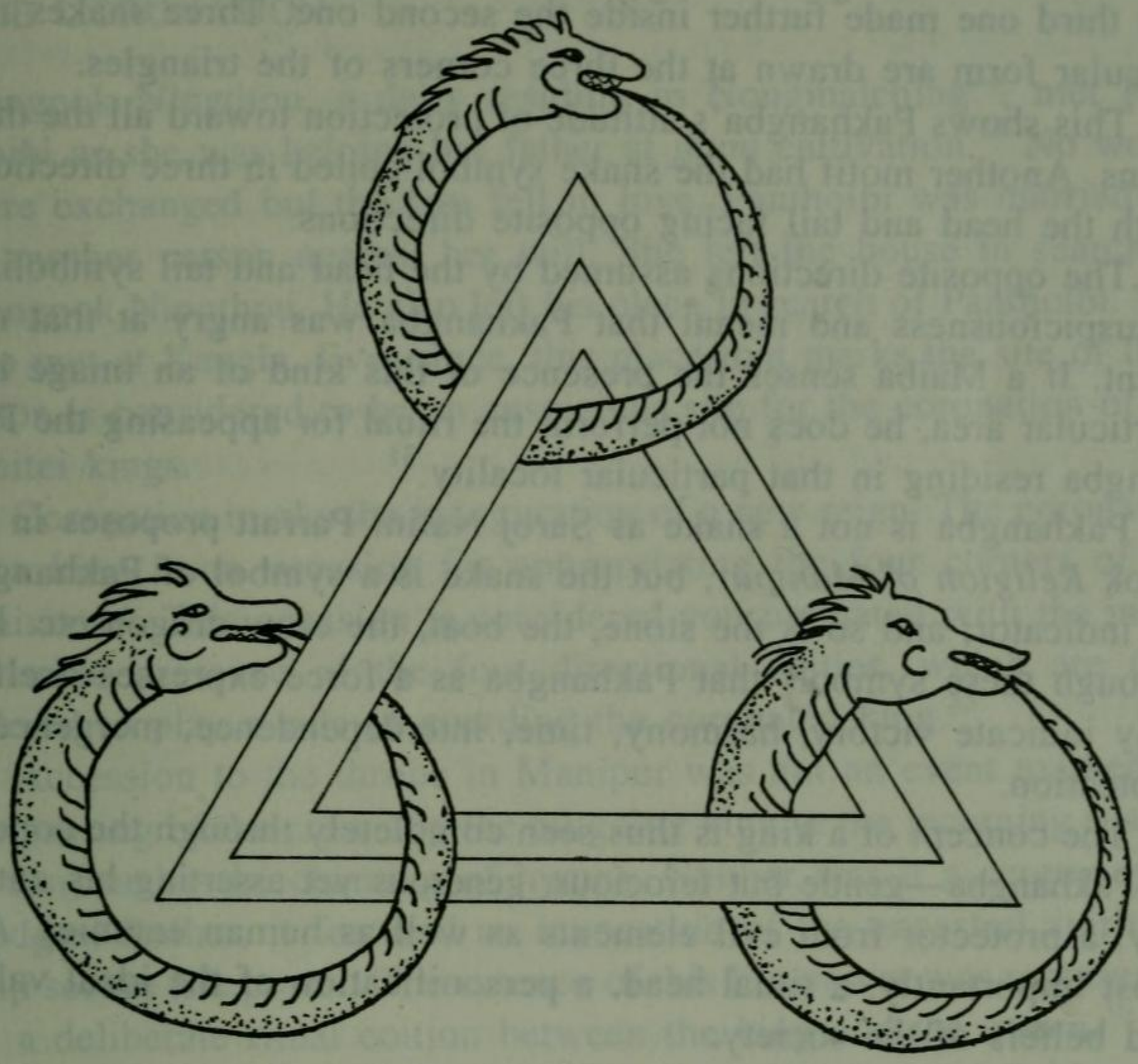
As one keeps turning the pages of the manuscript one comes across three snakes of different colours in a circular form intersecting one other; one is violet (Khaba-Nganba clan), the second one is reddish brown (Moirang), and the third one is white (Angom).



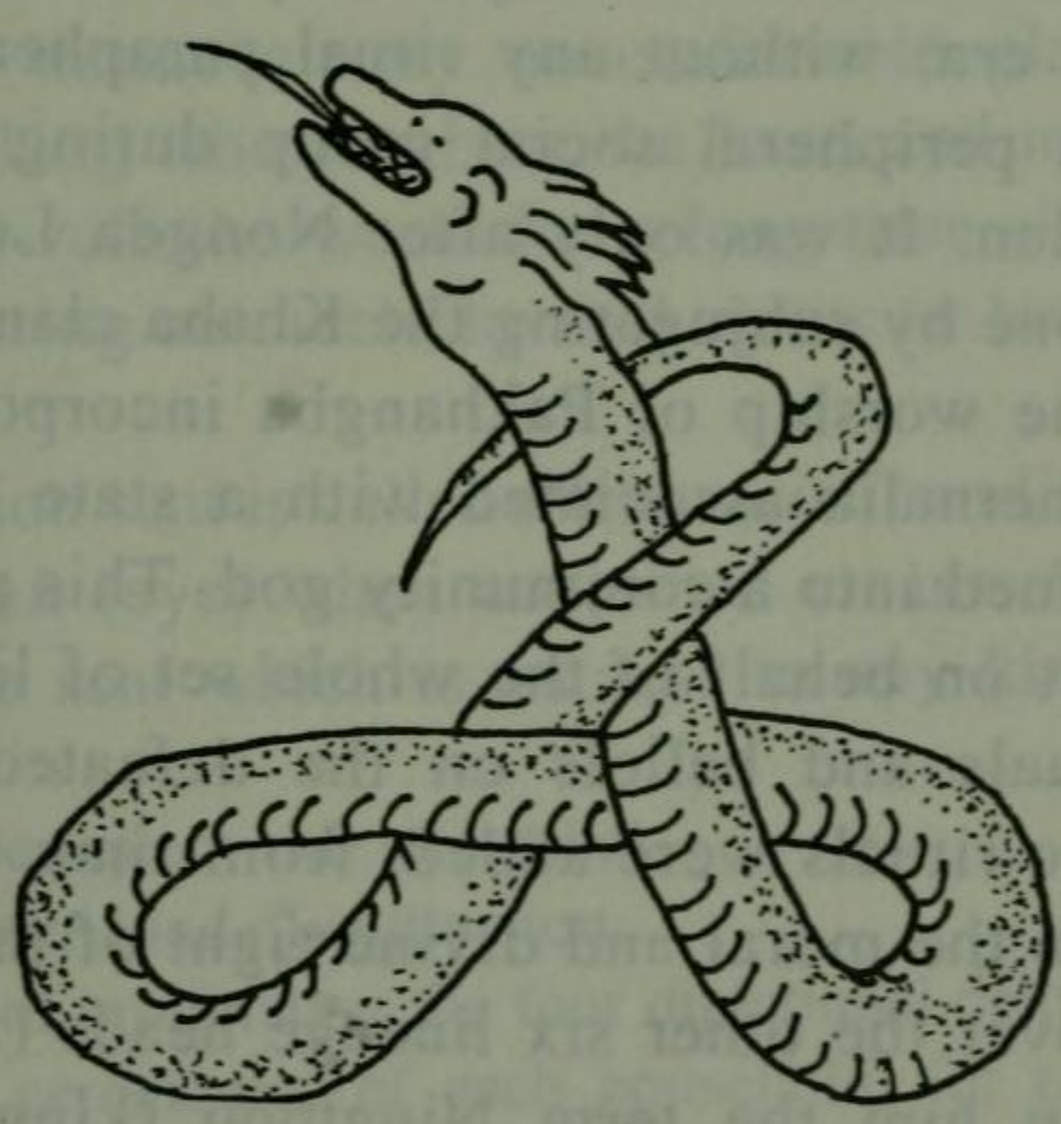
Three snakes intersecting each other

This symbolizes the interdependence of the three clans on one another, and defines the territorial boundaries, such that the intersecting portions show the intermingling of two clans. According to Pundit Achouba, these areas are those spaces where salt was available. Being a rare commodity, it was thought to be the joint property of two clans.[30]

[30] In fact, salt was such a rare commodity that the hill people, who did not have access to it had to depend entirely on the Meitei king for its procurement.



Pakhangba takes a triangular form



Pakhangba with head and tail in opposite directions

There is another peculiar shape taken by Pakhangba with three triangles drawn in the three different colours of Ningthouja, Luwang, and Khuman clans, with one triangle encompassing the second, and

the third one made further inside the second one. Three snakes in a circular form are drawn at the three corners of the triangles.

This shows Pakhangba's attitude of protection toward all the three clans. Another motif had the snake symbol coiled in three directions, with the head and tail facing opposite directions.

The opposite directions assumed by the head and tail symbolized inauspiciousness and meant that Pakhangba was angry at that moment. If a Maiba senses the presence of this kind of an image in a particular area, he does not perform the ritual for appeasing the Pakhangba residing in that particular locality.[31]

Pakhangba is not a snake as Saroj Nalini Parratt proposes in her book *Religion of Manipur*, but the snake is a symbol of Pakhangba, an indicator; and so is the stone, the boat, the crow-dragon etc. It is through these symbols that Pakhangba as a force expresses itself. It may indicate victory, harmony, time, interdependence, mergence or protection.

The concept of a king is thus seen completely through the concept of Pakhangba—gentle but ferocious, generous yet asserting his authority, a protector from evil elements as well as human enemies. And most importantly, a ritual head, a personification of the ideal values and beliefs of the society.

The worship of the divine ancestor Pakhangba, the progenitor of the Ningthouja clan, remained a simple lineage event during the pre-Christian era, without any ritual paraphernalia, when the Mangang were a peripheral social group during the rule of the Khaba-Nganba clan. It was only after Nongda Lairen Pakhangba ascended the throne by subjugating the Khaba clan[32] and then with his death, that the worship of Pakhangba incorporated into itself the whole paraphernalia associated with a state ritual. A family god was transformed into a community god. This process involved a collective effort on behalf of the whole set of lineage groups to impose their rituals and beliefs on the defeated and subsumed clans. Many more rituals were added, from time to time, by wise men to strengthen the moral and divine right of their lineage head to rule as ruler over the other six lineage heads (*Pibas*), and they also bestowed on him the term Ningthou (king) as a mark of deference.

[31] Which of the forms exists in which particular locality can only be deciphered by a Maiba through his supernatural insights.

[32] It was the first clan to fall under the Ningthoujas. See also next chapter.

THE CORONATION

Nongpok Ningthou, a deity residing in Nongmaiching[33], met Panthoibi as she was helping her father at *jhum* cultivation.[34] No words were exchanged but the two fell in love. Panthoibi was married off to another person against her will. She left the house in search of Nongpok Ningthou. He also left his place in search of Panthoibi. The two met at Kangla. Ever since, this place that marks the site of their union is considered to be an auspicious site for the coronation of the Meitei kings.

Coronation marks the inauguration of a new reign. The coronation of a king is an occasion for appropriating the four corners of the 'universe'. This occasion is considered consummated with the indispensable presence of the four directional deities, which are considered to play a role in guarding the coronated king.[35]

Accession to the throne in Manipur was not an event marked by the passing of the crown by the outgoing king to the incoming (usually son) or by the chanting of hymns. Neither was it a ceremony of pledges. Rather, it featured an invocation of the ancestral spirits to help secure life power. The essence of this life power was represented by a deliberate ritual coition between the king and the queen.[36]

The coronation seat is considered to be the abode of Pakhangba, who is supposed to be blowing fire from his mouth, which makes the seat or the throne a very uncomfortable place to sit on. It is believed that a king who can bear the heat, and manage to sit on the throne, can ably rule the world for a long time since it is a sign that in spite of suffering so much, he still wants to look after the welfare of the people.

The coronation seat is called *Phammoimit* and *Phallangmei*. *Pham* (seat) and *moimit* (eye) when conjoined means, 'seat eye', meaning perhaps that the seat which is witness to any kind of injustice; and

[33] A hill on the eastern side of Imphal.

[34] Slash and burn kind of cultivation.

[35] This ritual of propitiating the four directional deities is also an essential part of religious ceremonies of each household, for each individual, while stepping in to the next phase in life during naming ceremony, marriage, pregnancy, and death (see Chapter 5).

[36] In fact this emphasis on fertility and generation is the common thread, which binds the state structure, society, and the cosmic world as we will see in later chapters.

Phallang (bound) and *mei* (fire) implies the concentrated energy locked inside the earth on which the throne is placed. This seat of energy is located in the interior of the central mound of earth enclosed within the compound of the capital–the Kangla.

In another myth surrounding the coronation, Atingkok (Father Void) assumes the shape of a dead cow and floats down the river to find out who his most trusted son (amongst the three) is. The eldest son Atiya Sidaba (Sky God) and the second son Asiba (Sanamahi) do not recognize him. Only the third son, Konchin Tingthokpa (Pakhangba) notices him, pulls him out of the river and performs all the death rites. The father then reverts to his original shape, gives the third son the title of *Pakhangba*, meaning, the one who knows his father, and allows him accession to the throne.

This myth emphasizes the rightful inheritance of filial property or political rulership of the clan, by those who follow the traditional practices of the forefathers and pay ritual attention to their death. Thus, a person was considered capable of kingship if he was knowledgeable about rituals and traditions. Only then was he considered fit to be the political head. It was only through ritual knowledge that he could attain administrative control. There had to be, thus, belief in the power of ancestors and their ability to influence the future lives of the living and also belief in the power of fecundity and procreation, as I have explained below. The whole concept of state structure was derived from these beliefs.

The ritual of coronation, as Lokendra Arambam states[37] involves the segregation of the husband from the wife for the first five days, before coronation, in an out-house, near the coronation site; visiting shrines of fertility goddesses; returning and praying to the elders, enthronement; ritual coition between the king and the queen for five days; and finally, praying to ancestral gods for long life and happiness. Other rituals that follow the above are the waging of war against adamant tribes, and hunting for game or trophies. The *Maibas*, the *Maibis*, the traditional priests and priestesses, and the *penna* singer (penna is a traditional musical instrument), were the indispensable ritual functionaries.

Huge processions were taken out. They were very extravagant, with the king and the queen being taken on a palanquin and musical

[37] Arambam Lokendra, 'Manipur, a Ritual Theatre State', in *Manipur University Research Journal*, 1, Manipur University, 1986.

instruments being played at appointed moments. All the features of the ritual were derived from deeply ingrained religious principles. The procession routes were charted out according to traditional norms and customs. I reproduce below an English translation of the coronation ceremony as described in an ancient Meitei text, *Thiren Laiyat*:

When the Atiya Sidaba (Sky-Father Immortal) in the from of the ancestral dragon came down from the heavens with his tail brandishing a fire-sword and his breath emitting flame, the dragon teeth as balls of the same, he and the three gods dispersed on all sides—Pakhangba stayed at Langshang for five days. The Ashangbam lineages washed his feet. The Arambam brushed aside dirt, cleared his way with the broom. The Yaoreibam family started the fire, and Khunjam lay down the throne-seat. The Leirongjam lineage prepared the *Leirong Khok* (standard flag), the *Koksa Samchin* (special, headgear), the *Nayin* (ear-ring), *Noyet Chiphei* (some ornaments of birds feather in the ear), *Sampret Loiyampa Paknoi* (turban on the head in traditional style), *Ngancha Meimu Tomson* (special royal blouse), *Nongningkhoi Urekshek* (special decoration of birds plumage on the turban), etc. The Tinbijam family lay the foot mat. The Sarang-Leishangthem clan prepared the food, curry water, cooking pot, pans and other accessories of the household. On the fifth day the King moved into the *Yumjao* (Big House). On the sixth day he moved again into the *Sangai* (Another Big House), and was enthroned at Kangla. Thus at the entrance of the sweet fourth hour, and at a section of a full hour, when in January, the lunar fourteenth day of the sweet fourth hour entered, the King was thus enthroned, his position ensured, and he secured the control of the seven days and twelve months.[38]

The practice of lineage representatives performing specific ritual tasks was a mark of re-affirmation of their loyalty and obeisance to the ruler.

Thus through this act of coronation, the vital energies and the life power itself were secured with the help of ancestral spirits, which enabled the king to rule heaven as well as earth. Thus, as T.C. Hudson has also mentioned in his book *The Meitheis*, the king became 'the son of heaven, ruler of the kings, great and ancient lord, incarnation of God, the great lord Pakhangba, master of the bright sun, Lord of the plain and despot of the hills, whose kingdom is from the hills on the east to the mountains on the west'.[39]

[38] *Thiren Liyat,* Trans, 1981, produced in Arambam Lokendra, unpublished paper, pp. 20–21.

[39] T.C. Hudson, *The Meiteis*, Low Price Publications, Delhi, 1989, p. 105.

Another detailed description of the coronation is maintained in the *Naothingkhong Phambal Kaba* (Accession of Naothingkhong to the throne). It is the depiction of the coronation of Naothingkhong (AD 663–763), the eleventh king of the Ningthouja dynasty.

After five days of his reaching Kangla, the capital, and also the residential premises of Meitei kings, from his long journey from Langmais to Khuman land, Moirang land, and from there to Luwang principality a purifying ceremony took place. Water from seven different sources was fetched in which *Tairen*[40] leaves and five bunches of raw ginger were dipped. Naothingkhong was seated on fifteen banana leaves and he underwent ablution with the sanctified water. He had to put on a turban and perform a rite to ward off evil spirits which had caused suffering to his ancestors.

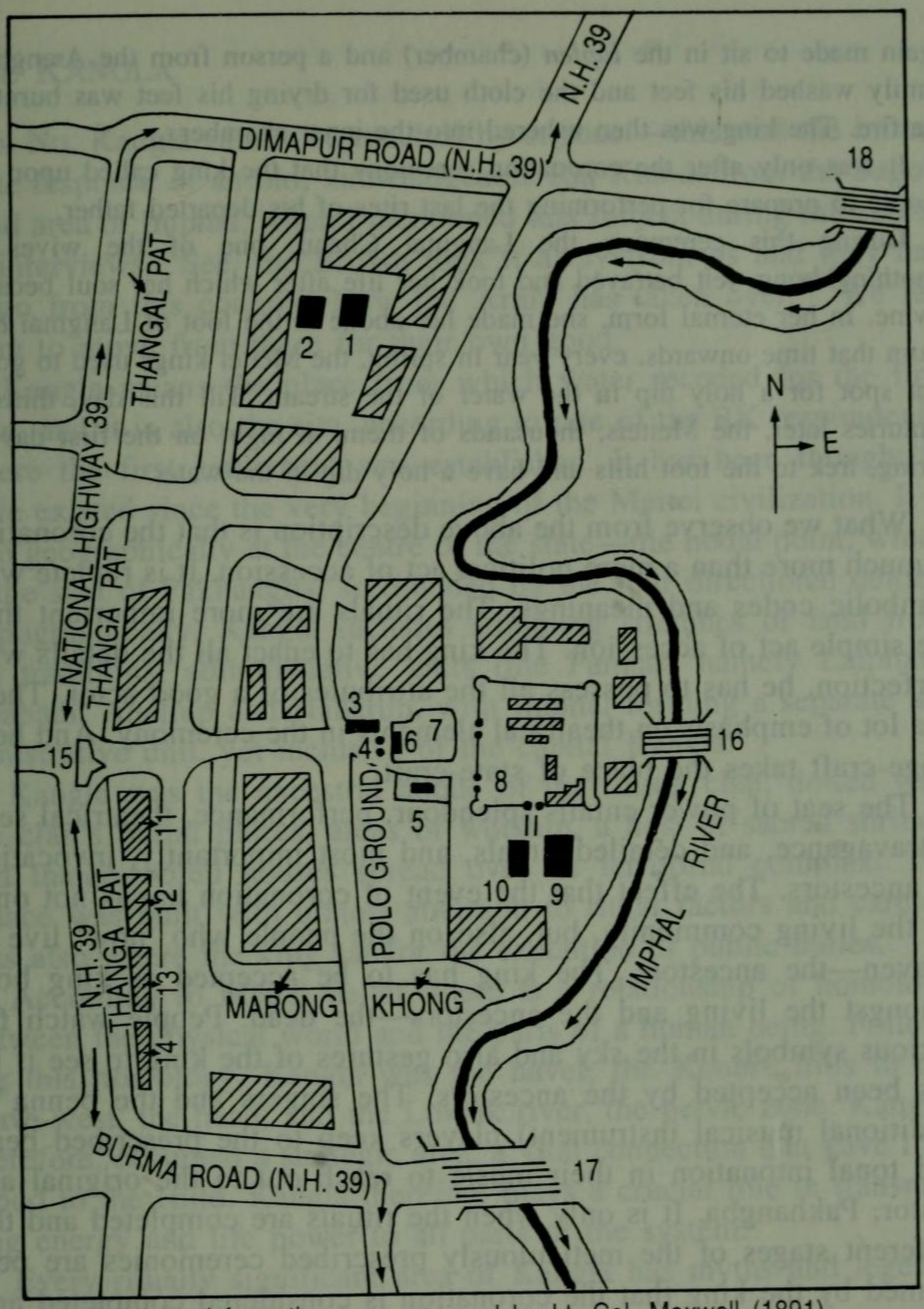
The queen went to stay with her parents for a few days. There, wearing white clothes, she offered prayers to the ancestral deities for the welfare of the king designate.

Inside the palace, the prince put on the ceremonial attire, and mounted a well bred horse. Trotting up to the courtyard he displayed his martial skill. The Maibas and Maibis (traditional priests and priestesses) spread plantain leaves on the ground. The prince reached near Eenokhong.[41] His face, hands, and feet were washed. A mat of plaited reeds (*phak*) was spread out for the prince to sit on and another to gargle over. On another mat were placed five earthen vessels filled with rice grain. He then gently made his way towards *Kuchu* (building of the king's court) near *Nunggoibi* (a place just outside the boundary of Kangla and north-west of *Uttara* (the womb of Kangla), on which the throne is placed. He performed the act of *Kyang laan hoiba* (enactment of a scene of driving away hostile forces). In front of the royal residence a *mayemba* (in charge of king's royal household fire) of Luwang clan wearing *Koksa pakloi* (a type of turban used by the Meitei men as a piece of luxury) tied a knot on the royal attire. An ornate basket, with a piece of cloth spread inside, was filled with pieces of raw ginger and placed before the sacred spot on which the king designate was to take his seat. The ceremony reached its climax when musicians conveyed the message of coronation to the heavens by beating drums and blowing a *tharaochi* (copper bugle). Finally, a bright torch was lit. The prince then retired to the royal residence and took rest in the *laplen* (chamber), where he was joined by his wife for ritual coition. To the accompaniment of a drum, *sana lamok* (a hymn to invoke Pakhangba) was sung by singers. For a long time the music went on.

On the conclusion of the fifth day the king designate went to a family of Luwang clan and had another ceremonial bath there. On his return, he was

[40] Leaves of the *Toon* tree held sacred by the Meiteis.

[41] A pond near Kangla, sanctified by the Meiteis. A homology is derived between it and the veins of the human body.



Adapted from the map prepared by Lt. Col. Maxwell (1891)

1. Temple of Brindabanchandra
2. Residence of Yubraj
3. Graveyard for coronated kings
4. Kangla Sha (Dragons)
5. Durbar hall
6. Utra
7. Coronation hall
8. Royal residence (Citadel)
9. Beithap
10. Gobindajee temple
11. Khabam
12. Laipham
13. Naharup
14. Ahallup
15. Western gate
16. Eastern gate
17. Sanjenthong bridge
18. Minuthong bridge

▨ Residence/building

again made to sit in the *laplen* (chamber) and a person from the Asangbam family washed his feet and the cloth used for drying his feet was burnt in the fire. The king was then ushered into the inner chamber.

It was only after the coronation ceremony that the king called upon his people to prepare for performing the last rites of his departed father.

During this ceremony the Langmai Chanu, one of the wives of Naothingkhong, felt betrayed and took her life after which her soul became divine. In her eternal form, she made her abode at the foot of Langmai hill. From that time onwards, every year in spring, the Meitei kings used to go to that spot for a holy dip in the water of the stream. Till this day, thirteen centuries later, the Meiteis, thousands of them, at night on the first day of spring, trek to the foot hills and have a holy dip in the water.

What we observe from the above description is that the coronation is much more than a mere political act of accession. It is replete with symbolic codes and meanings. The rituals are more important than the simple act of accession. The king has to enact all the details with perfection, he has to possess all the attributes of a good actor. There is a lot of emphasis on theatrical elements in the ceremony. And here stage-craft takes the place of state-craft.

The seat of power entails splendour, performance, theatrical sets, extravagance, and detailed rituals, and most importantly, invocation of ancestors. The effect that the event of coronation has is not only on the living community, but, also on the people who 'now' live in heaven—the ancestors. The king has to be accepted as king both amongst the living and the ancestors—the dead. People watch for various symbols in the sky and also gestures of the king to see if he has been accepted by the ancestors. The singers and the penna (a traditional musical instrument) players keep to the prescribed beat, and tonal intonation in their music to reach out to the original ancestor, Pakhangba. It is only when the rituals are completed and the different stages of the meticulously prescribed ceremonies are performed by the king that the coronation is considered completed and successful. He then becomes the ritual head from whose person emanates a deified mystical strength, as that characteristic of Pakhangba, which in turn provides him with legitimacy to be a political head also. Thus, coronation is about a substantive invocation to the ancestors and not merely an act of political succession.

THE KANGLA

'No, No, Kangla cannot be touched by anyone'—this was the immediate response of an old, knowledgeable Raj Kumar from the Sagolband area of Imphal, when I mentioned this subject during the course of interviews. 'See, the British took it away from us and they had to go from this country. Now the Army has taken over.[42] We tell them to move from there for their own good.'

Kangla means the place from which water receded for the first time, and it is also the site, according to one of the RK respondents, where the first settlement was established. It has been thought to have existed since the very beginning of the Meitei civilization. It is also geographically at the centre of the state—the nodal point, which is the seat of Pakhangba, surrounded by the four directional deities. Topographically, Kangla includes adjoining stretches of land from the traditional administrative units (the Pannas) namely Laipham, Khabam, Ahallup and Naharup, with Imphal forming a separate administrative unit, yet inclusive of the capital Kangla.

Kangla was the ancestral abode of the ruling clan, dotted with the clan's burial places, areas of worship, a host of sacred shrines, and thatch-roofed houses spread over its territorial complex. The palace was built with utmost attention to ritual factors and care. It was also where the king sat for the execution of public duties.

According to Meitei belief, there is a relationship of homology between the physical world and the parts of a human being. Following this homology, Kangla was the navel; the Koubru hills in the north-west, the head; and the Loktak river, the pelvic zone. Kangla, therefore, occupied a strategic area, a vital connection that gave life-blood to the child. Kangla therefore plays a crucial role in transmitting energy and life power to all parts of the system.

Every ritually significant area of Kangla has myths and legends woven around it.

Many struggles, fights, deaths and other dramatic happenings have centered around Kangla since time immemorial. Historically, its geographical area is spread between two important rivers, Nambul and Imphal. All the important roads of Manipur, which are interconnected through various routes and tracks, diverge to different areas of the state from Kangla.

[42] There is at present a battalion of the Assam Rifles, a para-military force stationed inside Kangla. This has hurt the people's feelings.

Traditionally, it was the centre for both political and religious power. The palace, where the king sat for giving an audience to the public, was built with much attention and care. Materials for its construction were brought from different areas of the state. Providing the material for the Meitei ruler's seat was, as we were told, a symbolic gesture by different ethnic groups and principalities to show their obedience and subjugation.

Although the period of Kangla's existence dates back to antiquity, *Cheitharol Kumbaba*[43] mentions the different additions and renovations done to it by various kings, mostly between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. It mentions the fortification of Kangla by bricks during the reign of Khagemba (1597–1652). The moat around it is said to have been dug during the time of King Khunjaoba (1652–66) as defence against the enemies. During the reign of King Paikhomba (1666–1697), five hundred and three men were engaged for three months for moulding bricks, and constructing huge structures.

The most remembered historical account about Kangla dates back to the rule of King Garibniwaz, whose successor, Chitsai, was overthrown by his brother Bharatsai. Because of such family feuds the political structure became weak. The Burmese, who were thoroughly defeated by Garibniwaz earlier, now took the opportunity and invaded Manipur and reached the royal seat in Kangla, under the command of Alauagpaya in 1759. In 1819 there was a second invasion and this time they occupied the valley for seven years (1819–25), which is also known as *Chahi Taret Khuntakpa* (literally meaning seven years devastation). The Burmese destroyed Kangla and left it in a state of decay with jungles and swamps.

Gambhir Singh liberated it in 1825 with his famous guerilla force known as the Manipur Levy of five hundred which was later converted to the first standing army of Manipur.

Kangla was rebuilt by Gambhir Singh's successor Nara Singh. Temples and buildings were rebuilt and fortified.

During the reign of King Surachandra, the British political agent of Manipur, St Clair Grimwood, was speared to death by a Meitei

[43] It is the royal chronicle which has recorded the minutest details of all the Meitei kings starting with Pakhangba, the first Meitei ruler. The authenticity of this chronicle was doubted by many of our respondents since it was burnt several times after the adoption of Hinduism. They wondered how such minute details were remembered as to be rewritten correctly several times.

soldier called Kajao, on the steps of the Durbar Hall, in the palace at Kangla, which ultimately led to the Anglo-Manipur War in 1891.

It also has a vast and prominent cremation ground, where only the coronated kings have been cremated. This right of cremation was not given to anybody else, no matter how close he was to the king.

There are nine major entrances towards the capital, Kangla, from the: (1) Sagolband Cachar Road, (2) Uripok Kangchup Road, (3) Tiddim Road, (4) Nambul Mapal Hiyangthang Road, (5) Indo-Burma Road, (6) Wangkhei Kongba Road, (7) Ukhrul Road, (8) Tinseet Road, and (9) Dimapur Road. Except for the Tiddim Road, all the other entrances are defended naturally by hills, namely, the Chingmeirong, Chinga, Hiyangthang, Kangchup and Nongmaiching.[44]

From among the four gates, in four different directions, the western gate was considered the main gate. It is on this spot this the Assam Rifles gate is located.[45]

On the north western side of the royal palace was located the temple of Brindaban Chandra[46] and the residence of the *Yubraj* (crown prince), the last of whom was Tikendrajeet who was hanged by the British after the famous Khongjom war.[47] On the south-eastern side were located the Pologround, the Durbar Hall, the royal graveyard of the coronated kings, the Kangla Sha,[48] and the Coronation Hall. On its right was the original Gobindajee temple.[49] Next to it was the royal residence.

The Gobindajee temple at Kangla was built during the reign of Nara Singh in 1847. It was damaged by an earthquake in 1868 and was reconstructed in 1889, but destroyed again in 1891 during the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891. The face of the temple is towards the

[44] *Ching* in Manipuri means hill.

[45] A replica of the original gate can be found at the gate of the Manipur University. It is a double storey structure with spacious chambers on both the floors.

[46] Another name of Lord Krishna.

[47] The Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891, which is discussed in Chapter 7 in detail.

[48] Sculptures of the mythical animals which are referred to as dragons by the English writers.

[49] Which was later moved to the present Palace Ground after the Anglo-Manipuri War of 1891.

east and the *Mandap*, the place where religious feasts were held and where *kirtans* were performed, was attached to the eastern side.

The Kangla-Sha are stated to have been built by the Chinese during the time of Mungyamba (1562–97). According to a British Political Agent, Johnstone, these symbols were erected by the Chinese war-prisoners. They were razed to the ground by the Burmese but later rebuilt by King Gambhir Singh. They were destroyed again by the British army in 1891. These symbols have officially become the state emblem in present times.

Except for the ruins of the Gobindajee temple (the Brindaban Chandra temple) and a few structures, nothing else has survived. The British after the 1891 war destroyed the palace to convert it into a garrison. It is at present being occupied by the Assam Rifles. The areas around Kangla were cleared of its inhabitants forcibly in order to 'sanitize' Kangla. These areas, except major portions of Talong were constituted into a separate administrative unit called the British Reserve, independent of the Manipur State Administration.

Once symbolized as the navel, the life giving element, the ritual centre, the abode of the mythical and deified Manipur kings, the Kangla in its present form and condition does not evoke feelings of awe and grandeur that it had once symbolized. But this does not mean that it has lost its mythical and ritual importance.

One Maichou (traditional Meitei scholar) claimed, while talking to me, that he had recently seen Pakhangba in the form of a golden deer, just inside the western gate of Kangla which had then disappeared very quickly.

The ponds inside the Kangla are still considered the abode of Pakhangba. During the *Lai-Haraoba* festivals the spirits of various *Umanglai* (forest deities) and gods are invoked from the various ponds in Kangla and transfused into idols in temples by the Maibis (traditional priestesses).

Thus Kangla, even though it stands as just a ruin at present, is still the centre of veneration for the Manipuris. For the believers, it is a place which is not supposed to be touched by any mundane human being, for it is still held to be sacred. Public pressure on the Assam Rifles seems to have mounted so much recently that they have promised to evacuate the place so that the present government can declare it a historical site. Many of the respondents expressed satisfaction on hearing this decision.

3

The Social Structure

The Salais

The main feature of the social structure of the Meiteis is the institution of a system of *salai*.[1] It includes the *Mangangs/Ningthoujas, Angoms, Khumans, Moirangs, Khaba-Nganbas, Luwangs* and *Chengleis*. Each of these salais had a territorial boundary in the valley.[2] Later in the course of intergroup conflict, the Mangangs emerged the most powerful. This group gradually brought all the erstwhile independent principalities into its fold and established a homogeneous Meitei state. Except for a few areas like Moirang, where people of the Moirang salai remain dominant, all the other areas comprise of all the seven salais under the all encompassing term '*Meitei*'. The hill people who settled in the valley over time continue to reside in certain specific pockets.

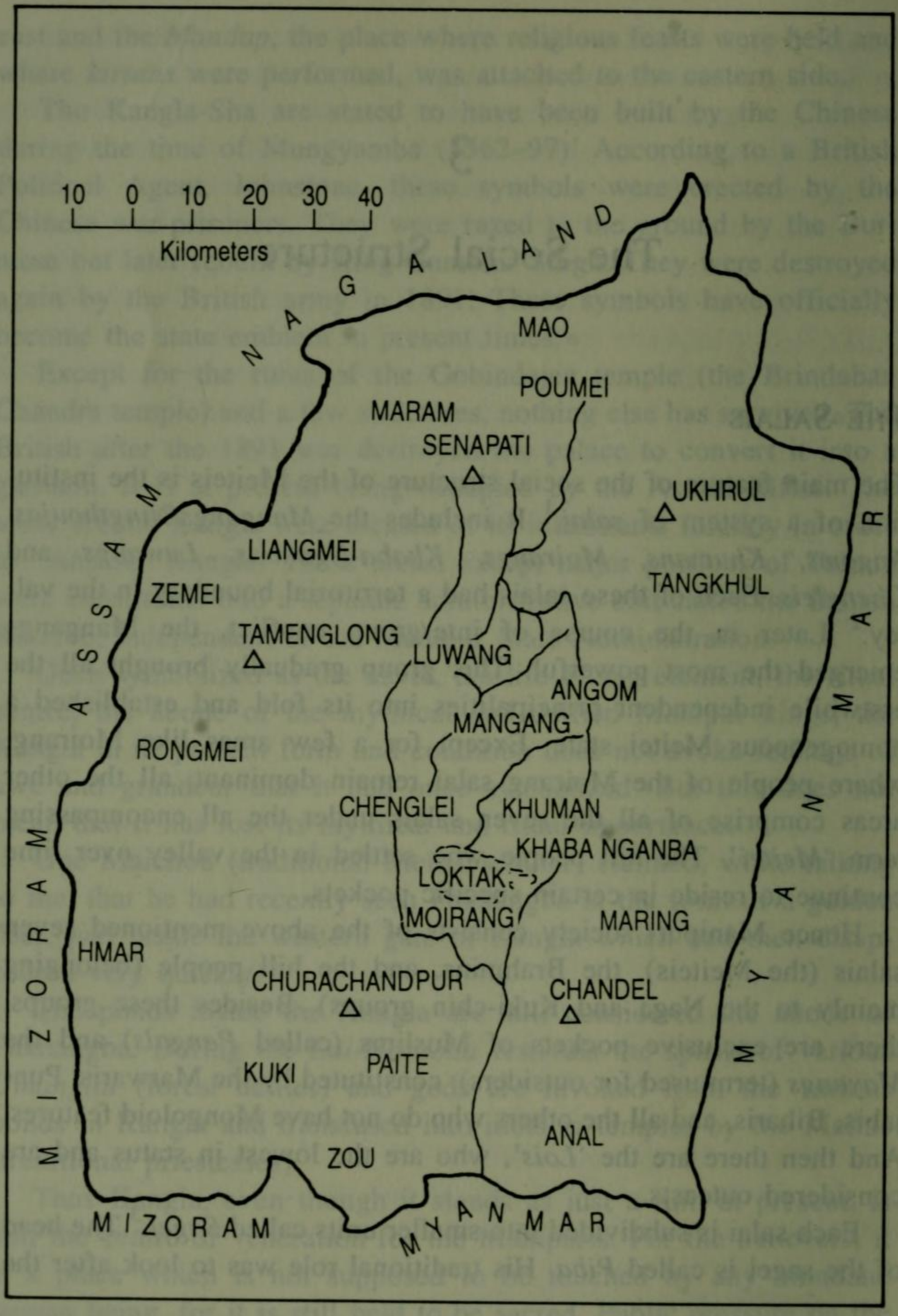
Hence Manipuri society consists of the above mentioned seven salais (the Meiteis), the Brahmins, and the hill people (belonging mainly to the Naga and Kuki-chin groups). Besides these groups, there are exclusive pockets of Muslims (called *Pangals*) and the *Mayangs* (term used for outsiders), constituted by the Marwaris, Punjabis, Biharis, and all the others who do not have Mongoloid features. And then there are the '*Lois*', who are the lowest in status and are considered outcasts.

Each salai is subdivided into smaller units called *Sagei*.[3] The head of the sagei is called *Piba*. His traditional role was to look after the

[1] Large exogamous units, each tracing itself from a common, mythical ancestor, who is part of the Meitei divine pantheon. It can be loosely translated as clan.

[2] See map of salai principalities.

[3] Smaller groups sharing the same family name or the *Yumnak*. Exogamy in a stricter form is practised in this group.



Map of Meitei Clan Principalities and Important Tribes of Manipur

welfare of the people of his sagei and settle small disputes. The piba was not a hereditary functionary, as only an elder person with good, moral character, who had married in compliance with the prescribed norms, can become the piba. Like the king, he was the ritual head of this group. His role is predominant during public festivals like the *Lai-Haraoba*[4] held in the group's own locality, as also during the worship of the forest and weather deities (*Umang Lais*). When the Ningthouja salai subjugated the rest of the salais, sagei gods of other salais, joined the pantheon of the Ningthouja gods. Pakhangba, who was the founding ancestor of Ningthoujas, became one of the brothers of the originator of all the other salais.[5] The seven ancestors of the seven salais were then made brothers having a common ancestor named Atingkok (Father Void).

The names of each sagei, including that of the Brahmins, would normally indicate either the role assigned to them traditionally or the place or direction from which each group has come, during the successive waves of immigration over a period of time.[6] Thus, while for example, in the case of the Thangjam sagei, *Thang* literally means knife or some such cutting tools thus indicating that they were connected with manufacturing such implements; Yendrenbam sagei members are those who have come from Burma; the sagei named Guru Aribam (of the Brahmin) means the house of learned teachers whose ancestor was the Guru of King Charairongba; and the Takhellambam sagei members originally came from Takhel, the present day Tripura. This kind of nomenclature, I was told, points to the fact that people who came from outside, were either absorbed within the existing sagei order, or assimilated within the Meitei society by giving a new name to them. This assimilation process was limited to early migrants and the Brahmins. The later migrants like Muslims, Marwaris, Punjabis, and Biharis etc. did not get sagei status. They remained and still remain outside the domain of the core Meitei society, socially as well as geographically. This point is further

[4] Festivals for pleasing the gods (*Lais*). Refer to Chapter 5.

[5] See grand genealogy in Chapter 6.

[6] '*Bamon Khunthoklon*' (migration of Brahmins) and other such ancient records were maintained by the royal priests. They give details of when each group or community among the Brahmins came and settled in the valley and how by giving them local names, they were included in the Manipuri society.

emphasized by the fact that while the Brahmins and other early migrants were allowed to marry with the already existing Meitei sageis, the later migrants or the mayangs (outsiders) were and still are not accepted/absorbed socially. In the earlier period there were sections of hill people who were also absorbed into the Meitei fold. At the same time, a few Meiteis also went to the hills and settled there; for example, many brothers of the first line of descendants from the Chengleis salai went to the hills and became Kabuis.

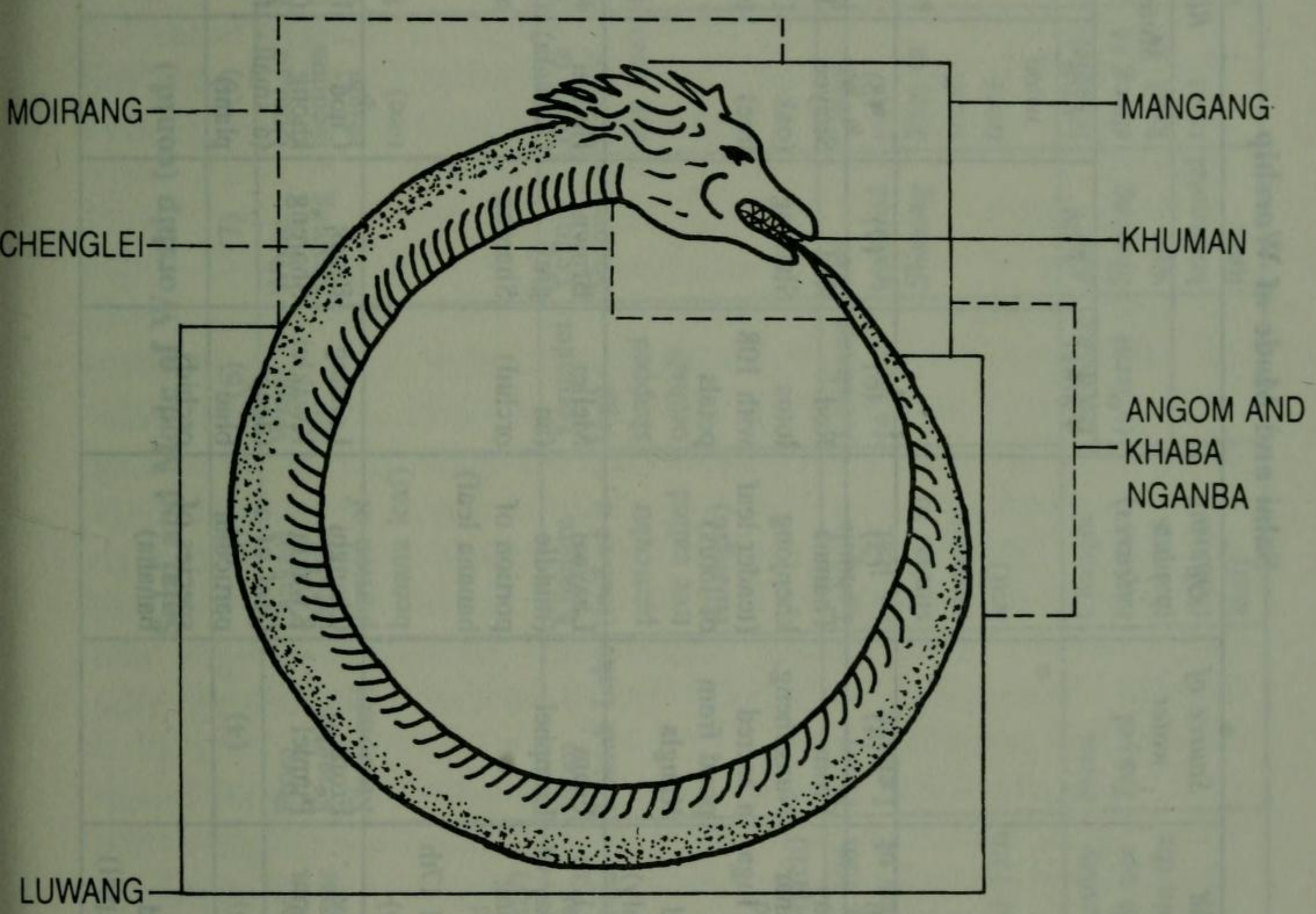
All the seven salais have strict prescribed forms of worship for their respective ancestors. In fact the way one worships, the specific kinds of offerings one makes, and the particular time at which one worships the salai deities denotes the salai to which one belongs. The reader must have noticed that I am using terms such as ancestor and deity interchangeably.[7] According to one Mangang salai woman, when the Meiteis worship their ancestors, it includes the forest deities (Umang lai), clan deities (Sagei Apokpa), the household deity (Sanamahi), deified ancestors (Ibudhou), and immediate ancestors.[8] In fact they trace their origin from all these beings. And it is believed that all these beings are still part of their respective salai and it is with their blessings that one can achieve prosperity. In this sense, anybody born in a particular salai remains in one even after his death. So there is no elimination, just addition. Another notable aspect is that for any kind of calamity, or joyous occasion, the Meiteis always go back to their origin myth and towards the one they originated from. Hence, time not only moves forward but also reverts back-ward, because of the tendency to reach and remember one's origin and venerate it.

Since Mangang's ancestor Pakhangba, was born on Thursday, the 15th lunar day of the *Inga* month (around 15 June), all the Mangangs worship their ancestor on that day. For offerings they have to collect water from Nungcheng in Kangla, the plate on which the offerings are to be kept is *Thamnakhenjong* (leaf of a lotus). Offerings include, red lotus with 108 petals, *Thamjet* (lotus fruit), red *Shareng* (a fish), fire wood (*Shayee*), fire (*Meithang taret*), knife (*Chakthang*) and a sprinkling leaf (*Uruman*).

[7] It is because both the ancestors and god reside in the same divine realm.
[8] For details see the Chapter 4.

Similarly, prescribed dates, modes and materials for worshipping their respective ancestors are specified for the rest of the six clans. All these details are summarized in tabular form on the next page.

According to a maibi (priestess of traditional faith), each of the seven salais is represented in relation to Pakhangba[9]. As mentioned earlier, after the merging of the seven salais into the common fold of Meiteis, all the seven salais trace their origin from Pakhangba. Hence, the Mangangs represent the head of Pakhangba, Luwangs are the middle portion or torso, Moirangs are the portion between the head and torso, Khumans are the tail. Angoms and Khaba-Nganbas are the pelvic area, and Chengleis represent the area where the head and tail meet.[10]



[9] Other believers of the traditional Meitei faith also gave a somewhat similar structure.

[10] It may apparently look similar to the way different *Varnas* are associated with the body of Brahma, but unlike the Varna system in which Brahma assigns their hierarchical position according to each Varna's association with each part of the body; *Brahmins*—head, *Kshatriyas*—shoulders, *Vaishya*—thigh and *Shudra*—feet, the association of different salais to the body of Pakhangba symbolizes their mergence into the Meitei fold and also their relations with the Meitei rulers. There is no hierarchy in this system.

Salai and Mode of Worship

Salai and identifying colour	*Ancestor*	*Day and date of worship*	*Source of water*	*Offering plate (leaves)*	*Ritual Elements*						
					Materials to be used						
					Flower	*Fish*	*Fire wood*	*Fruit*	*Fire*	*Knife (of different shapes used mainly for ritual purpose)*	*Sprinkling leaf*
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Mangang (Reddish (gold)	Pakh-angba	Thursday 15th lunar day of Inga month (around 15th July)	From Nungcheng, a sacred pond from Kangla	Thamna-khenjong (tender leaf of lotus)	Red lotus with 108 petals	Red Shareng	Shayee (oak tree)	Thamjet (fuit of lotus)	Meithang Taret (seven fires)	Chakthang (a kind of dagger)	Uruman
Luwang (Bluish white)	Poireiton	Friday 12th lunar day of Wakching month (around 17th January)	From Lamphel	Laayaai (middle portion of banana leaf)	Mellei (an orchid)	Brown/ grey Shareng	Heikru (Anwala)	Kihom (Pine-apple)	Khoiju (leaf of a plant Khoiju)	Tondumba (pointed knife)	Ukhok-maton (tip portion of a tree)
Khuman (Black)	Poireiton	Tuesday 15th lunar day of Sajibu month (around 17th April)	From Pumlel	Changbi Kwakla (leaf of a particular species of banana)	Leisang Kwaklei (deep blue orchid)	Black Shareng	Chou-khong (a small plant)	Heibong (a wild fruit)	Meithang Taret (seven fires)	Tonkakpa (blunt knife)	Pungphai (a medicinal grass)

Salai and Mode of Worship (contd.)

(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Angom (White)	Purei-romba	Monday 12th lunar day of Ingen month (around 11th July)	From Kongba Meirombi	Laayaai (Middle portion of benana leaf)	White lily	White Shareng	Upal (a medium height tree)	Heibong (a wild fruit)	Maiba Chingaga louba (fire produced by friction)	Pukak thang (a kind of dagger)	Tairen (leaves from Tairen tree)
Moirang (Reddish Brown)	Thangjing	Saturday 12th lunar day of Lamta month (around 16th March)	From Loktak Lake	Khangra (leaf of a particular tree called Khangra)	Yerumlei (egg shapped orchid)	Yellow Shareng	Kuhi (a kind of oak tree)	Kangrou (a wild fruit)	Meithang Ahum-dagi (three fires)	Yenba dokshaba (a dagger with sharp ridges at the top)	Naohing
Khaba-Nganba (Violet)	Atongba	Sunday 10th lunar day of Kalen month (around 13th May)	From Leitang	Lehoula (A leaf similar to turmeric leaf)	Leishang (a fern)	Red textured Shareng	Ching yen Shin (a small tree)	Heiba (a wild fruit)	Meikham Meiwai	Chinaiba (a sharp edged dagger)	Grass
Chenglei (Green)	Asangba	Wednesday (details not given in the source)	From Takyel	Changbi laayaai thamna (banana leaf)	Leishang (a fern)	Any Shareng with horizontal lines	Nonglei-shang (a kind of tree)	(scented fruits)	Meithang mangarak (five fires)	Khunthok Thang (a dagger)	Napi-shingbi (grasses)

The association of each salai with different parts of the body of Pakhangba emphasizes the merging of all the salais within the Meitei fold. It perhaps also points to the differing status assigned to each salai in relation to the state structure represented by Pakhangba. Thus, while the Mangang, Luwang and Khuman are represented by a specific division of the body:

Mangang : head,
Luwang : torso, and
Khuman : tail portion,

the other four salais have been assigned the middle of each of these three divisions:

Moirang - Between the head and torso,
Angom and Khaba-Nganba - Between the torso and tail,
Chenglei - Between the tail and head.

This point was further emphasized, when I was told that while the Mangang, Luwang, and Khuman are represented by three respective elements:

Mangang - Fire/morning,
Luwang - Human/Evening,
and Khuman - Water,

the other four clans have been assigned no such representations.

Historically, the Mangang, Luwang, and Khuman have been relatively more powerful principalities than the other four and according to their genealogies, there has been a higher degree of inter-marriage among these three. Rather than through complete subjugation through battles with the Mangangs, they perhaps came into the Meitei fold by cementing their mutual relationships through marriages and through occupying important positions in maintaining the Meitei/Ningthouja dynasty.

The Angom salai acquired a prominent position in more recent times. In the palace ground area, there still exists the temple of the Angom king and his *Yumjao* (house) is situated near the Gobindajee temple. One of his descendants told us that his forefather got the title of Angom king because his sister got the title of 'Maharani' after she married the Meitei king. As mentioned earlier, the Meitei King Charairongba (1697–1709) drove out the Angom king and made his descendants an integral part of Meitei society. Hence the Angoms were left kingless. It is perhaps because of the problem of an acephalous status, that these men from Angom salai, whose sisters got married to Meitei kings acquired the status of kings (of the

Angom salai). Thus instead of kingship being transferred by virtue of might and through ritual attributes,[11] the kingship of Angom was passed down through matrimonial alliance. Being a patriarchal society, the Meitei society made it obligatory for the Angom king to remain humble and reverential in the presence of the Meitei king.

Ningthougkhomba, the Meitei king, defeated the Moirangs. It was a direct, face to face confrontation. The present Meitei people of the Mangang salai still take pride in the way their ancestors defeated the Moirangs. The general feeling among the Moirang people on the other hand is that of betrayal. An old Moirang man explained this feeling. According to him, the Ningthoujas cheated them during the battle. They strategically killed nearly all the male members of the Moirang salai and married their women, leaving no room for future uprisings. This feeling of deceit is reflected in their assertion to continue to stay in their ancestral land, evolving, as we shall see, their own cultural constructs. Moirang Laiharaoba maintain a distinct style. Their life styles, rituals, and folk tales have a distinct Moirang touch.[12] Although they call themselves Meiteis, to distinguish themselves from the hill people, they like to mention their salai name almost immediately. For the Mangangs as well as the other salai members living in Imphal, the 'Moirangs' still connote a distinct identity in their minds. Historically, there was a relatively larger exodus of women of the Moirang salai in the composite Meitei society through marriage.

Khaba-Nganba was the most powerful principality before the accession of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba to the throne, the first historical king of the Ningthoujas. They were the most ferocious group, and were defeated by Nongda Lairen Pakhangba only after a fierce battle. It happened around AD 33. The battle was so fierce that this salai was reduced to virtual non-existence. Being numerically small they were reduced to an insignificant position *vis-à-vis* Pakhangba.

The Chenglei salai, was numerically very small from the beginning and was surrounded geographically by three powerful principalities; the Luwangs, the Khumans, and the Mangangs. They were simply outnumbered. The heads of both Khaba-Nganba and Chenglei were called piba[13] in contrast to the heads of the other salais who

[11] Like the process of coronation of Meitei kings.
[12] The territorial distinction of other salais are not clearly marked.
[13] Head of the kin group.

were addressed as *Ningthou* (king). These terms themselves give an indication of the way these principalities were perceived in the realm of the power structure. While the Angoms got the title Ningthou by virtue of their alliance with the Ningthouja king, the Moirangs got it perhaps because of their strength to fight stubbornly and not get easily subjugated. Therefore, it is clearly evident that the respective terms used to refer to them and their status has been, and still is, perceived in relation to Pakhangba, who was once in the mythical past the originator of only one salai—the Ningthouja.

Though Ningthouja and Mangang are used for the same salai, there are some differences between the two. According to one Khongman Ima,[14] the Ningthoujas had migrated from the west. This term was introduced during the reign of the Mangang King Charairongba. The word *Ningthouja* literally means 'sons of kings'. The Mangangs who were the most dominant salai, which later on absorbed all the other salais, came to be known as Ningthoujas subsequently. Nara Singh and Karta groups of the Ningthouja salai are the descendants of the early migrants from the west. The Mantrimayums, the third group among the Ningthoujas, are considered the original Mangangs. Ningthoujas, the migrants from the west, merged with the then existing powerful Mangangs and became one, and were called both Mangang and Ninghouja interchangeably. However, the term Ningthouja is used more in a political context, while the term Mangang is referred to in social contexts, especially while arranging matrimonial alliances.

In earlier times when the Khaba-Nganba salai was the most dominant, before the migration of Ningthoujas from the west, the Mangangs were an insignificant chiefdom living around the Kangla area of today. It was surrounded by the then mightier principalities of Angom, Khuman and Moirang.[15]

With the migration of the Ningthoujas and their integration with Mangangs, leadership came in to their hands and with this they slowly subjugated the other principalities. The last principality to be completely subjugated was that of the Moirangs in the eighteenth century.

Hence, instead of seven independent principalities, there came into existence a composite Meitei society, comprising of all the seven salais. This newly acquired unification, although brought about by force and

[14] 'Ima' is a form of address for an elderly woman.
[15] See the map given at the beginning of this chapter.

might, was not maintained by the use of force. The maintenance of the new political edifice rested more on social and cultural mechanisms. The history of the people was re-written. Subsequent history traced the genealogies of all the salais from one ancestor—Lord Atingkok (the Father Void) by making him the originator of each of these salais.

Nongda Lairen Pakhangba (AD 33–154), who was the originator of the Mangang/Ningthouja salai, became the model king, the originator of the state structure for the whole society and from whom the history of the whole people was traced.

Much ritual, magic, and divinity was attached to this reconstructed history which made it simpler to get authenticated in the minds of the people.

It was not only through reinterpretation of history and myth that people got incorporated (willingly) into the Meitei fold. The chiefs and other important nobles of each salai had to be given important positions in the governance of the newly formed composite Meitei society. It was a combination of justification through the use of myths and actual political negotiations, plus the belief that all the seven salais are really the descendants of the one, ultimate ancestor, and hence part of one large family.

This kind of a construction of history of these salais brought about an image of equality and fraternity among them. It also eased out the possibilities of tension and conflict. However, the unification of all seven salais under one umbrella term, did not mean the loss of their identity. The fact that each one was an exogamous unit necessitated marriage between two different salais. This strengthened intra-group fraternity and brotherhood, while the inter-group network was established through alliance.

Secondly, although each salai was on par in equal relationships with one another, their feeling for one another remained guarded. Mangangs took pride in their royal genealogy, Khuman and Moirang were proud of their bravery and considered Mangangs wily. Angoms and Luwangs liked to believe that they were brothers of the Mangangs. Khaba-Nganba and Chenglei were the insignificant salais mainly because of their small number.[16]

[16] In the Khongman area there are only one and eighteen families belonging to the Khaba-Nganba and Chenglei salai respectively, in the Palace Ground, four and two, and in Sagolband seven and twenty-six, according to the 1991 electoral list.

The temperamental interpretation of the colour symbols as stated in the earlier chapter, seem to portray each salai's relationship to the Mangangs. While the Luwang and Angom were subordinated earlier, Moirang and Khuman seemed to have given in after a lot of resistance, and the Moirangs must have been tougher than the Khumans. The temperament of Khaba-Nganba seems to suggest that it must have been an important principality, whose words must have carried weight, while Chengleis are shown to not have had a cordial relationship with the Mangangs.

The rule of exogamy was initially strictly enforced within every salai. Any person marrying within his/her own salai, was to be excommunicated or even sentenced to death. To overcome such problems, changing one's salai was allowed during the time of King Charairongba (1697–1709). According to a respondent in Khongman, 'the change of salai was allowed to overcome the problems of prohibited marriages'.

An actual anecdote as narrated by an old man in the Sagolband area confirmed the above mentioned process. This man belonging to the Sapam sagei stated that they were initially Ningthoujas but later on became Khumans. According to him, they originally belonged to the Mangang salai at the time of King Charairongba. Sapam Ningol Ningthemchaibi, some referred to her as Nungthilchaibi, daughter of the Sapam Piba got married to King Charairongba which was prohibited since it was against the rule of clan exogamy. It was probably since that time that Sapams joined the Khuman salai to spare the king the charge of being guilty of incest by marrying within his own salai.

Two things seem to emerge from this narration. First, it was the king who initiated the process of changing salais by making his wife a member of another salai and thus set a precedent. Secondly, the woman was made to change her salai which is contrary to the present practice. Rather than the woman, and hence her whole sagei changing the salai, it would have been more convenient for a single male to move out of his salai.[17] Being a patrilineal society, where the children inherit their father's salai, they would have been automatically of a salai different from their mother's, and the people from their mother's sagei would not have to go through this changing process. The diagram below will explain it more clearly.

[17] This is the case among the rest of the people except the king's family.

Instead, if the woman has to change her sagei, the way King Charairongba's wife had to, then it will be expressed as in the diagram thereafter.

Since the time of Charairongba, the practice of changing one's salai came into vogue. With the exception of the king, it was the males who changed their salai. In the case of the king, the change of salai membership would have meant a complete shift of power and ritual status to a subservient salai. This would also have meant a weakening of the reformulated history/myth justifying the rule of Ningthouja/Mangang kings as divinely ordained.

Even though Charairongba was the king, he had to face the repercussions of going against the Meitei norms and ethics, and along with him the whole Sapam sagei too face the consequences. A part of the Sapam sagei now belongs to the Khuman salai.[18]

Charairongba was the father of Garibniwaz. Hinduism had already made its inroads in his times. This period witnessed the direct confrontation between the old Meitei faith and Gouriya, a popular brand of Hinduism in Bengal brought in by Shantidas. One of the most vocal representatives of the Meitei faith was Maichou[19] Khongnangthaba. Charairongba's marriage to the woman of his own salai[20] was an added blow to the already weakening base of the traditional beliefs and norms.[21] Khongnangthaba probably saw this kind of marriage as a threat to the Meitei fabric as a whole. He pronounced that Charairongba would be ruined if a son was born to him out of this wedlock. The king then ordered that if a boy was born, he should be killed.[22] When Ningthemchaibi of Sapam sagei gave birth to Garibniwaz, it was let out that the child was a girl. The brother of Ningthemchaibi, Sapam Kiyamba, took the child away from the palace. The guards consciously did not stop them. The child was put in a basket that was floated down on the Imphal river. This happened

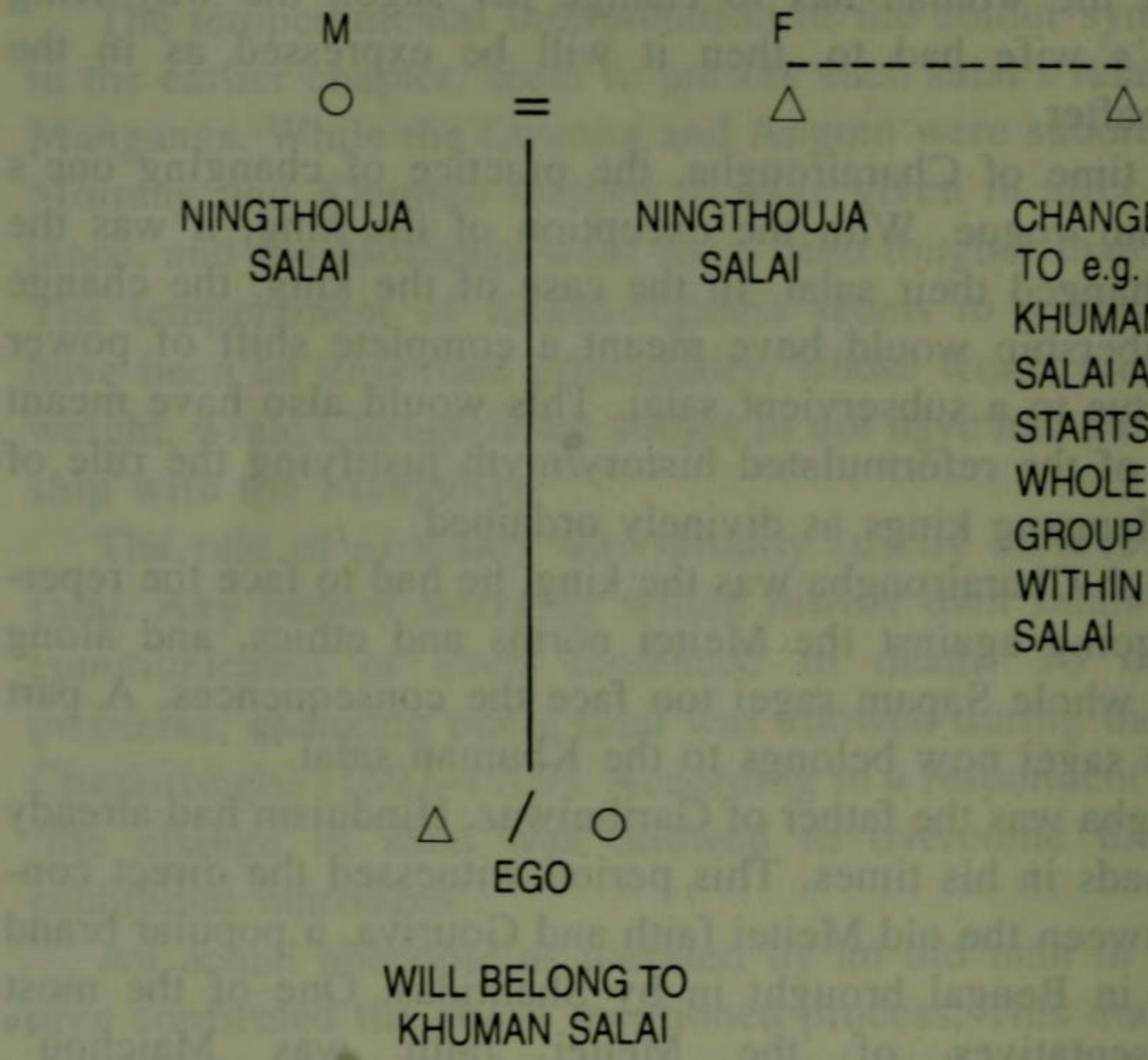
[18] Clifford Geertz also mentions this when he says that in Negara, even the king had to obey the norms and ethics of the society, since the cultural and social sanctions were perceived to be above the king.

[19] A man well versed in ancient texts and secret knowledge.

[20] Even though the salai was changed to Khuman in order to facilitate the marriage.

[21] The believers of traditional faith were already angry with the invasion of Vaishnavism and when their king himself modified the norms to get social sanction for his action added fuel to the fire.

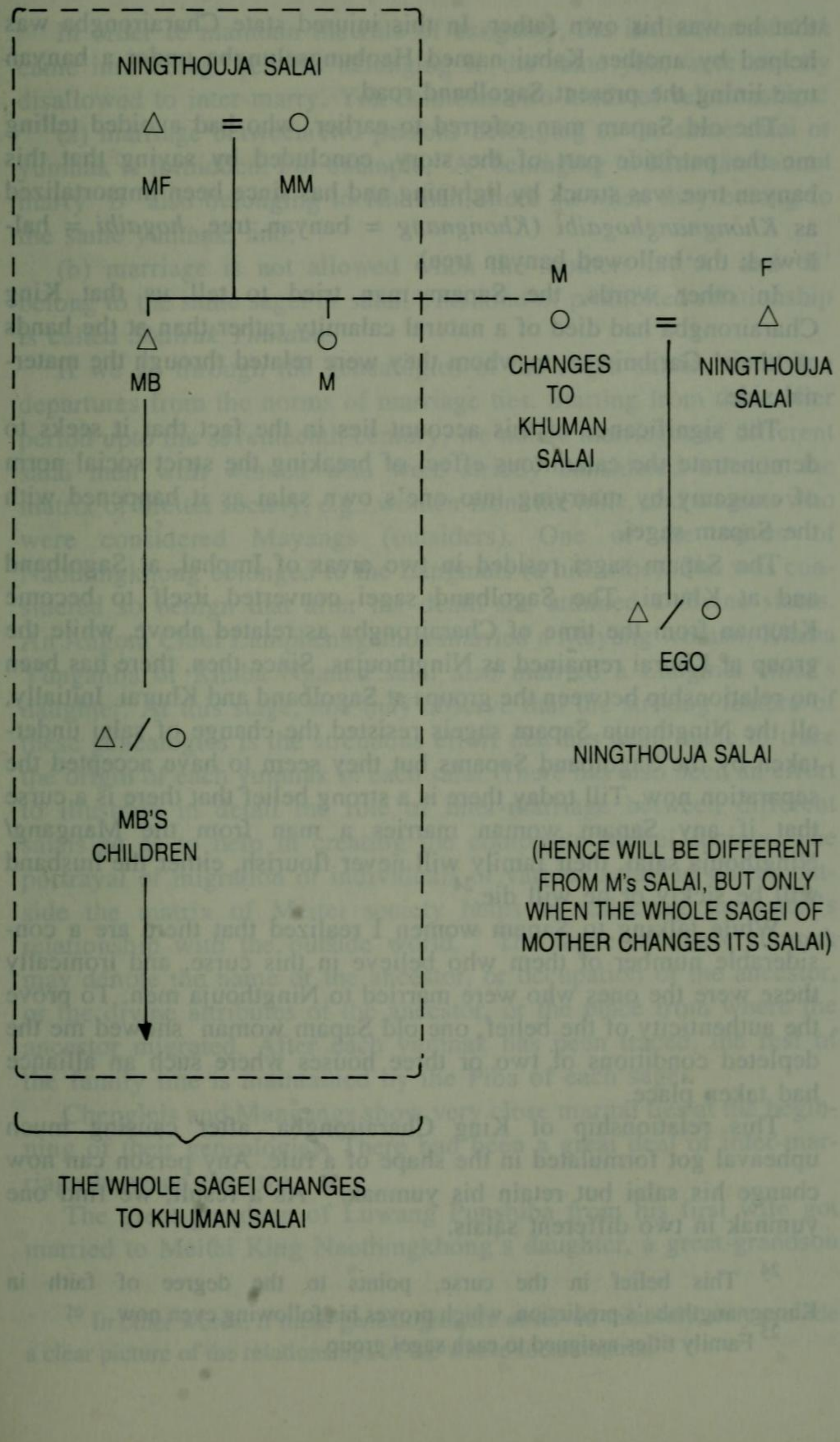
[22] Even the king feared and believed the learned men.



inside Kangla. A Thangal tribal chief spotted him and took him to his village and brought him up like his own son. He gave him complete training in the martial arts and *thang-ta*, a traditional sword fight.[23] According to one of my respondents, Thangal is a Naga village located on the eastern side of Manipur. When Garibniwaz grew up, a minor rebellion took place regarding the paying of tributes, against the Meitei king. Since the Thangal chief did not agree to pay tributes, the Meitei king took Garibniwaz to his palace as compensation, and housed him in *Haomachaloishang* (*Hao* = tribal, *macha* = child, *loishang* = office: the office of the tribals). The king did not know that he was his own son.

On reaching this point in his narration, the Sapam old man started crying and was reluctant to tell the whole story. I was later told by others that Garibniwaz supported the rebellions against the demand for increasing tributes to the king. In one such rebellion in Thongshuk Haokhul (a tribal village), he fatally injured the king, not knowing

[23] The tradition is still very much alive in Manipur. Many young girls and boys even today get training under some guru and learn this martial art with all its ritual and performative aspects.


NINGTHOUJA SALAI
MF
MM
M
MB
M
CHANGES TO KHUMAN SALAI
F
NINGTHOUJA SALAI
EGO
MB'S CHILDREN
NINGTHOUJA SALAI
(HENCE WILL BE DIFFERENT FROM M's SALAI, BUT ONLY WHEN THE WHOLE SAGEI OF MOTHER CHANGES ITS SALAI)
THE WHOLE SAGEI CHANGES TO KHUMAN SALAI

that he was his own father. In this injured state Charairongba was helped by another Kabui named Haobungselungba under a banyan tree lining the present Sagolband road.

The old Sapam man referred to earlier, who had avoided telling me the patricide part of the story, concluded by saying that this banyan tree was struck by lightning and has since been immortalized as *Khongnanghogaibi* (*Khongnang* = banyan tree, *hogaibi* = hallowed; the hallowed banyan tree).

In other words, the Sapam man tried to tell us that King Charairongba had died of a natural calamity rather than at the hands of 'their' Garibniwaz, to whom they were related through the maternal side.

The significance of this account lies in the fact that it seeks to demonstrate the calamitous effect of breaking the strict social norm of exogamy by marrying into one's own salai as it happened with the Sapam sagei.

The Sapam sagei resided in two areas of Imphal, at Sagolband and at Khurai. The Sagolband sagei converted itself to become Khuman from the time of Charairongba as related above, while the group at Khurai remained as Ningthoujas. Since then, there has been no relationship between the groups at Sagolband and Khurai. Initially, all the Ningthouja Sapam sageis resisted the change of salai undertaken by the Sagolband Sapams but they seem to have accepted the separation now. Till today there is a strong belief that there is a curse that if any Sapam woman marries a man from the Mangang/ Ningthouja salai, their family will never flourish, either the husband will be sickly or he will die.[24]

While talking to Sapam women I realized that there are a considerable number of them who believe in this curse, and ironically these were the ones who were married to Ningthouja men. To prove the authenticity of the belief, one old Sapam woman showed me the depleted conditions of two or three houses where such an alliance had taken place.

This relationship of King Charairongba, after causing much upheaval got formulated in the shape of a rule. Any person can now change his salai but retain his yumnak.[25] As a result, we find one yumnak in two different salais.

[24] This belief in the curse, points to the degree of faith in Khongnangthaba's prediction, which proves his following even now.

[25] Family titles assigned to each sagei group.

In order to maintain the rule of exogamy, the institution of *Yek* came into being. Persons belonging to the same yek, were strictly disallowed to inter-marry. Yek connotes two kinds of relationships:

(a) marriage between two persons belonging to the same salai or yumnak is forbidden. For example, 'A' belonging to Khuman cannot marry 'B' also belonging to Khuman, more so when they belong to the same yumnak, and;

(b) marriage is not allowed when the mothers of 'A' and 'B' belong to the same sagei or salai. This kind of prohibited relationship is called *Shairuk Tinnaba.*

If we go through the genealogies of the seven salais, we notice departures from the norms of marriage ties. Starting from the earlier period upto the seventeenth century, we notice marriages of different salai men with women who were strictly considered outside the matrix of Meitei society, e.g., women from the hills, and women who were considered Mayangs (outsiders). One of the wives of Naothingkhong belonged to the Langmais (a hill tribe). She was considered so benign that after her death she attained a divine status. An Angom Chief Lamphenngamba married a Mayang woman. Khaba Yunganba of Khaba Nganba salai also married a Langmai chief's daughter. At this stage, one may observe that the striking feature of these genealogies is the strenuous effort that has been made to trace the origin of each yumnak in each salai. There has also been an effort to illustrate in detail the role of inter-marriage between different salais so as to help in creating the composite Meitei society. The portrayal of migration of individuals of various salais to places outside the matrix of Meitei society helps in reflecting the latter's relationship with the outside world.[26] The name of one's yumnak may denote the name of the ancestor, or occupation of the ancestor, or the divine attributes of the ancestor, or the place from where the ancestor migrated. After each yumnak has been traced, the rest of the family line is maintained by the Piba of each sagei.

Chengleis and Mangangs show very close marital ties at the beginning of their genealogies. There had been a great deal of inter-marriage between the two.

The great-grandson of Luwang Punshiba from his first wife got married to Meitei King Naothingkhong's daughter, a great-grandson

[26] In other words, if these genealogies are observed minutely, they provide a clear picture of the relationships of the whole social matrix.

from his third wife also got married to a daughter of Naothingkhong. The fifth generation from Luwang Punshiba was also witness to a marriage of a daughter into the fifth generation of the Moirang salai.

Instances of migration and conversion have been marked in the genealogies, but no effort has been made to trace them after that. The first Angom chief's second queen's son, Mandom, got converted to the Luwangs. Luwang Punshiba's ninth wife's son settled in Khuman land, his son shifted to Laitang, another to Uchiwa, and yet another got converted to Maring (a Naga tribe). A son of the sixth wife of Luwang Punshiba converted to the Angoms.

Among the Chengleis many of the brothers of the originators are said to have settled in the hills and become Kabuis.

Punsiba Khurenchanaba of the Moirang salai's second generation's genealogy also shows a lot of migration. His first three sons migrated. Kasumachaiba merged with the *Chakpas* (the outcast community believed to be the original settlers of Manipur). Khenjangchaiba fled to the Mayang (outside) land, and Sanalithup fled to Cachar.

These migrations seem to have occurred during the war between the Ningthoujas and Moirangs. And these sons of the Moirang chief must have fled to avoid their subjugation by the Meitei king.

The salai system thus was and is the main edifice of the Meitei society from which the Meitei people trace their myth, their origin, and their history.

It has a very strong federal structure, with no trace of strict hierarchy. And this was because once the Ningthouja salai had all the other salai under its control, these together merged to form a non-hierarchical composite society. That was probably the reason why all efforts by the Brahmins in the recent past to change this system to that of the gotras and thus make it a caste based society failed miserably, in spite of Hinduism's spread in the political structure and its adoption as a state religion. This aspect will be further elaborated later in this chapter.

Division of Labour

The Panna system:

'Panna' means division. The people of Manipur were divided into four pannas to pay *Lallup* services to the Meitei king. Lallup services meant free service for ten out of every forty days rendered for military as well as economic activities. The whole society was

divided according to the age and status of each individual. The four pannas were Ahallup (comprising of the old men), Naharup (comprising of the young men), Laipham (ancestral area of worship), and Khabam (derived from Kha = South, Mapham = place), implying the region south of the ancestral area of worship. Later on two more pannas were added comprising of the Tangkhuls,[27] and Lois. The Lois were Hidakphanba (those who attend to the hookah or tobacco) and the Tangkhuls were the Potsangba (the watchmen). This system covered every male in the country above sixteen years of age.[28]

Each panna had its own head called *panna lakpa.* Next to him was *lallup chingba*, who ensured the smooth functioning of the lallup system. He recorded the names of the people of his panna who attended the lallup. He also served as an intermediary between the officers in Kangla and men in the villages. Next to him was *machahal,* who took active part in the discussion of the *Khundin*—a meeting held on every tenth day with lallup chingba as the president. In the meeting they discussed the work done during the lallup. Persons who could not attend lallup informed the lallup chingba in this meeting.

Each of the four principal pannas were divided into two departments, *Sanglen* and *Sanguba.* The officers of the Sanglen department were in the service of the king, while those of Sanguba worked for the queen.

Besides these there were various village level and district level officers in-charge of other administrative functions, for which they were paid in cash and for which a special status was assigned to them. The services of lallup of every panna member were rendered as a mark of loyalty to the king and state, and no remuneration was given.

[27] One of the Naga tribes.

[28] According to R.K. Saha, those who were genealogically close to the king performed non-menial services and those who were genealogically distant used to do menial work. These developed into *phamdoms* (prestigious services), *lallup* (essential services), and *loipot* (menial services). He states this in his article on 'State formation among Meiteis of Manipur', in Surjit Sinha (ed.), *Tribal Politics and State System in Pre-colonial Eastern and North Eastern India*, K.P. Bagchi & Co., Calcutta, 1987.

I disagree with him in his use of the term menial/non-menial. According to me they were, instead, distinguished between manual/hard work and non-manual work. His terminology seems to evolve from the very familiar caste hierarchies, fitted into a completely different society.

The nature of this system sometimes gave rise to major rebellions, especially from the hill villages of Tangkhul and Kabuis, who were made to contribute much greater labour in the form of lallup. Of course, these rebellions were either short-lived or suppressed quickly but the feeling of discontent and discrimination could not be suppressed and formed one of the strong bases of the hill–plain divide. This was further reinforced by the adoption of Hinduism by the Meiteis and the introduction of the concept of purity and impurity according to which the hill people were categorized as impure. Partly as a reaction to this, most of the hill people adopted Christianity as their new religion. I will deal with this in the forthcoming paragraphs.

Impact of Hinduism on the Social Structure

One maiba (male priest) in Khongman area whom I addressed as Ipal (uncle), narrated the following incident:

Khongnangthaba, a champion of the Meitei faith, has written in a particular text that a person who does not know himself, who does not purposely try to know his own individual personality is an *Urit-napangbi* (one who does not listen to anything deliberately, also one who does not do anything deliberately). And there is no benefit from the presence of someone who does not know his characteristics or that of his own father, and his own forefathers, etc., and who does not do anything deliberately.

At the place where the sacred Puya were burnt[29] after the declaration of Hinduism as state religion, five maichous (traditional scholars) gathered together underneath the *Laining Heikru* tree[30] and addressed Chingngu Khongnangthaba collectively: 'Maiba Chingngu, we cannot take it (believe) that the sacred Puyas which disappeared (fled away, literally speaking—as is believed to have happened) is in your hands, but for the sake of the future preserve the *maparitaret*[31] from disappearing altogether'.

On hearing the pundits, Chingngu Khongnangthaba replied that what they were saying was true. But at the same time he rebuked them saying that it was unbefitting to hand down a text as sacred as the Meitei Puyas to such people who stood dumb and did not put up any sort of resistance to the king when the sacred texts, that were the property of their own forefathers, were

[29] *Puya—Meithaba* in Manipuri, Puyas are the ancient texts of traditional Meitei belief.

[30] The divine anwala tree.

[31] Literally meaning 'the seven originators', implying the source of their origin.

being burnt in front of their very own eyes. They had no courage to tell the king that such a thing never happened in the time of *nabudhou* (your forefathers)).

"Hence I shall not leave such a sacred text as the Puyas in your hands. I will leave it only at Thambamkhong."

Thambamkhong is not a place outside in the physical world, but in your minds, in your thinking, in your heart of hearts (within your soul). In carrying out something in the name of your forefathers, like safeguarding the integrity and honour of your forefathers, with strong determination, with courage (to oppose those who seek to destroy the sacred texts), the enlightenment that you acquire thereof in your heart is Thambamkhong. None except those who can stand up to safeguard the property of one's forefathers or ancestors, one's heritage, can gain the knowledge which is inside our moral being which is called Thambamkhong.[32]

Khongnangthaba's words seemed to have echoed far and wide, since this was the basic reaction of all Meiteis toward Hinduism after it was made a state religion. Although people were not defiant, in fact they adopted Hinduism with all its codes, festivals, and rituals, their unspoken allegiance remained toward the traditional Meitei beliefs and faith.

Hinduism became a 'state religion' and remained so. However, it failed to enter the psyche of the people, and it was able to evoke only overt gestures from the people as if to merely convince the king of their conversion to this new found faith.

Ipal of Khongman mentioned before seemed to be convinced about the authenticity of the personality called Khongnangthaba and had complete faith in the traditional Meitei beliefs.

He seemed to be very irritated by the connotation of the name Khongnangthaba (which according to him means cutting down of a banyan tree) given to the great maichou (scholar). According to him it should have been Thongnang instead. *Thong* means bridge, a bridge between the past and the future, which conjoins heaven and earth, which enlightens, with knowledge from the sacred texts, when we traverse it. Crossing this bridge means reaching out to the cosmic realms to acquire divine knowledge.

[32] Such direct speech, used by my respondent as if he had witnessed the conversation between the pundits, portrays the degree of disagreement he had with the conversion of Meiteis to Hinduism. This kind of reaction was seen in many of my respondents who had strong faith in their traditional religion.

The Ipal of Khongman, while referring to the Meitei faith said, when the 'light' of *Taibang mapu* (the supreme god) enters into the mind of a mortal being, that individual will be enlightened, beyond the bounds restraining ordinary mortals. It is very difficult to understand or to master the contents of the sacred texts. It can be mastered only by a person of exceptional mental capability. If everyone could have read the texts, then it would have lost its value and there would have been no meaning in regarding it as something extraordinary or 'sacred'.[33] This difficulty in reading the texts according to him proves that all men are not born the same. If everybody had been born with the same mental capabilities or attitudes, then life would have had no meaning.

On the other hand, an old man in Sagolband area had responded differently to the question of traditional Meitei faith in relation to Hinduism. I reproduce below an extract from the interview:

Ques. : Do you worship Sanamahi[34] also, besides Gopaldevji (Krishna)?

Respondent : No, we do not worship 'Sanamahi' in the real sense of the word. We do keep a space reserved in one corner of the house for the Leimaren and Sanamahi[35] for traditions' sake but we do not indulge in devoted worship as such.

Ques. : Do you participate in Lai-haraoba (one of the traditional Meitei festivals)?

Respondent : No.

Ques. : Even when you were young?

Respondent : Never.

Ques. : Why?

Respondent : I do not agree with the Sanamahi cult.

Ques. : Do you believe in the maibas and maibis (traditional priests/priestesses)?

Respondent : It is not that I entirely disbelieve in the maibas and maibis, but simply that I believe in my god, that is, Gopaldevji. So there is nothing much to believe or not to believe in any other thing.

[33] Characterizing their traditional belief as something mysterious and mystic was a special feature and a lot of emphasis was placed on it.

[34] A male household deity belonging to the Meitei belief.

[35] See Chapter 5 for the importance of these deities in the house.

On the whole, this person convinced me that he was totally converted to the Vaishnav form of Hinduism. But, I had also noticed that his sister had gone to the Khongman area for worshipping one of the directional deities of the traditional Meitei faith, for the quick recovery of one of her sons.

Although, one can say that the sister need not agree with her brother's views, one can definitely notice that in spite of such changes in faith, a link between the people and their original religion could not have been broken everywhere by the Brahmins who spared no efforts to do that. They burnt the traditional texts (puyas), changed its mythology/history, made Manipur part of an anecdote in the Mahabharat, and changed the religious base of its politics by making the Meitei kings the incarnation of Lord Vishnu.

But they could not succeed in overthrowing the traditional faith because it was not premised on an imaginary realm. It was rooted in their belief in their ancestors, who in their minds were as real as themselves, and from whom they originated. Hence denying the faith was as impossible as denying the existence of their own selves.

I will dwell upon this as we move on further. Elements of Hinduism had started infiltrating Meitei society somewhere around the sixteenth century AD. A temple in Bishnupur (40 km away from Imphal) stands testimony to that. At that time it was the capital of King Kyamba (AD 1467–1508). The temple was a symbol of peace between this Meitei king and the King of Pong in Upper Burma. The King of Pong presented him a Vishnu idol made of gold[36] for which the king, Kyamba built the temple in this area and gave it the name Bishnupur. Before, this place was called Lamangdong.

The first king to be greatly influenced by Hinduism was Charairongba.[37] The king's son Garibniwaz proved to be a more ardent admirer of this religion and he took to the Ramanandi sect and made Hinduism a state religion. This was done through the use of force. Traditional texts were burnt, anybody caught practising their old religion was sentenced to death. He was influenced by a Brahmin called Shanti Das Gosai who is believed to have come from Sylhet in Bengal.

One of the descendants of Garibniwaz[38] himself told me the aggressive nature of Garibniwaz. This respondent, who is a Raj Kumar,

[36] It is now installed in the Gobindajee temple in the Palace Ground.
[37] Father of the popular king, Garibniwaz. See also Chapter 2.
[38] He belongs to the eighth generation from Garibniwaz.

also discussed Khongnangthaba, who he said was a direct competitor of Shanti Das Gosai.

According to this RK, King Garibniwaz listened only to Shanti Das Gosai and ignored Pundit Khongnangthaba. In spite of that, Khongnangthaba requested the king not to embrace this religion (Hinduism) because, 'this religion is not higher than the religion which we are already practising.' But the king did not listen to him. Feeling dejected, Khongnangthaba went home, locked himself inside and never came out. Meanwhile, Shanti Das had become a leper, and it was only after much pleading on his behalf by the king that, Khongnangthaba told him to take a dip at the confluence of the Luwangli river and the current flowing from the Langol hill. Shanti Das was then cured. It was then that Shanti Das started respecting the old faith. Later, it was believed, the body of Khangnangthaba could not be traced.

According to this Raj Kumar in Sagolband, this is how the old faith and Hinduism intermixed and Meitei faith retained its respect.

The magical elements in these anecdotes may be disputed on the grounds of authenticity, but what I am trying to highlight is the way in which people understand events in their contextual settings so as to legitimize the characteristics of their society, as they stand now. While Hinduism was respected and its rituals followed by the Meitei people, the Meitei beliefs and rituals also retained their importance, as will be shown in the fifth chapter.

First, the Brahmins tried to reformulate the whole origin myth and retell it with elements from Hindu mythology. *Atingkok* (Father Void) became Vishnu, Pakhangba became moon god Soma, the seven salais became the seven *gotras* of the Brahmins and the Manipur mentioned in the Mahabharata, the place where Arjuna[39] married the princess Chitrangada was made to be the Manipur of the present times. All the Meiteis were converted to the Kshatriya Varna in the caste hierarchy of the Hindu system. For the first time, a Hindu system was developed on the basis of only two castes: Brahmins, who came from outside, and Kshatriyas, who were the originally inhabiting Meiteis. The Vaishya caste could not develop since, traditionally, trading was not an occupation assigned to any particular section of Meitei society. Also, the Meitei tradition does not speak of any people assigned to do menial jobs as is assigned to the Shudras in

[39] One of the five Pandav brothers in this Hindu epic.

the caste structure, hence there are no Shudras in Manipur. But. of course, there were people who did not accept Hinduism as their religion and retained their old Meitei faith. They were ex-communicated by the king and forced to settle in the peripheral areas, called the Loi settlements. They were not considered Hindus. They were not allowed to interact socially with the newly Hinduized society. Yet they can not be equated with the Shudras of Hindu caste society, since they were never assigned to undertake menial jobs.

Garibniwaz is known to have been so influenced by Hinduism that incidents of 'Sati'[40] were heard of during his reign. Many temples of Ram, Hanuman, Sita built within the vicinity of the Palace Ground stand testimony to his strong faith. He even introduced a body called the Brahmo Sabha.[41] This is a body constituted of Brahmins who used to look after the Hindu temples and set Hindu norms and codes for the people. While, during his reign, people were still shifting their allegiance from one sect of Hinduism to another, it was during Bhagyachandra's[42] time that a consolidated Meitei Hindu community with a faith in Gouriya Vaishnavism was established. He installed the image of Krishna (which he is believed to have seen in his dreams) in the Gobindajee temple at Kangla. Now it stands at Palace Ground. Another idol of Krishna which was made little shorter than the one in his dreams was installed in the Vijay Gobinda temple in the Sagolband area of Imphal. He introduced *Raaslila*, the choreography of which was also said to be a part of his dream. The movements of this dance form seem to have been picked up from the traditional dance performed by the maibis, called *maibi jagoi*.

The process of Hinduization of the Meitei community however, was not very smooth. Firstly, extreme coercive methods were used (especially during Garibniwaz's time) and all new rituals and festivals were introduced by justifying their existence on the supernatural power of dreams. Bhagyachandra had to justify the establishment of the Vaishnav cult and the introduction of *raaslila* through his ability

[40] The wife of the dead person who sits on the pyre with his body on her lap and gets burnt alive. It is a symbol of an ideal wife in major parts of north India.

[41] This incidentally has nothing to do with the reformist movement in Bengal by the same name. Brahmo Sabha here simply means congregation of Brahmins.

[42] Garibniwaz's nephew.

to converse with Lord Krishna in his dreams, which in turn was accepted as 'divine will' by the people.

Besides the original seven salais constituting the composite Meitei society, and the Pangals (Muslims) believed to have settled in this place during the time of Khagemba as war captives, and the hill people, some new groups emerged with the process of Hinduization—the Brahmins, and the Lois. The Mayangs (the outsiders) who came mainly as traders are the more recent migrants who remained outside Meitei society.

The Brahmins

The Brahmins, locally known as *Bamon*, as the priestly class came to Manipur after the adoption of Hinduism as the State religion during the reign of King Garibniwaz, essentially to fulfil the ritualistic requirements of Hinduism. They are scattered all over the Meitei localities in the valley looking after the local Radha Krishna temples. They look after the *debottar* property dedicated by the local individuals to the deity, as trustees and also look after the ritual needs of the locality. There is a large concentration of Brahmin families near the Kangla in a locality called the *Bamon Leikai*. Most of the priests attending the Gobindajee temple and other temples patronized by the royal family hail from this locality. Aribam, Guru-aribam, Gurumayum, Manoharmayum etc. are some of the Brahmin sagies who were considered eligible to attend the Gobindajee temple and royal functions.

Unlike those in other parts of the country, the Brahmins in Manipur did not have a very high ritual status as the social structure of the Meiteis is not essentially based on hierarchy. Although they are not considered superior in the social hierarchy, they are given a high ritual status. They are revered as knowledgeable persons and addressed as Aeigya. During the reign of King Bhagyachadra (1759–96) the Brahmins were accorded a very high status when Hinduism was firmly entrenched. Important Brahmin functionaries, five in number, came to be called *Pancha Ratana*. The number was increased to nine during the reign of King Chourajit (1803–13) and came to be known as *Nava Ratna*. They came to play an important role in the affairs of the state apart from the ritual roles they performed.

In the entire social matrix they stand apart because of their ritual status, as well as for their physical appearance. Many of them have non-Mongoloid features. Yet they have addopted the Meitei lifestyle

completely. They even have a place for Sanamahi, the traditional household deity of the Meitei faith, in their houses.

The history of the Brahmin migration can be traced to the fifteenth century, much before the processs of Hinduization began in Meitei society. *Bamon Khunthoklon* is a traditional text which shows the record of the migration of the Brahmins in this state since the time of King Kyamba (1467–1508). The origins of more than eighty Brahmin *yumnaks* (family titles) have been traced, beginning with the coming of the first recorded Brahmin, Subhi Narayan from *Takhel* (present day Tripura), during the reign of King Kyamba whose descendants are known by the yumnak *Phurailatpam.* When the Brahmins came, most of them did not bring women with them, so the Meitei kings allowed them to marry local women and settle there. Some of these early Brahmin migrants married tribal women. These early Brahmin migrants settled in Manipur and lived like any other subjects of the Meitei kings without any special privileges or status. They were given yumnaks by the kings and became a part of larger Meitei society, though they were never made part of the seven salai structure, the core of the Meitei social structure. Nevertheless, in course of time the Brahmins have become an integral part of Meitei society, adopting the lifestyle and Meitei way of life. They have made this place their homeland, so much so that they would like to identify themselves as Manipuris first, and then as Brahmins. Perhaps this explains the reason why the anti-Brahminical feeling which is prevalent in the rest of the county is conspicuously absent in Manipur, despite the active role played by the Brahmins in forcible conversion to Hinduism and *Puya Meithaba* (burning of sacred texts) during the reign of King Garibniwaz.

A man belonging to the Rongmei Naga tribe in Bishnupur, held the Brahmins responsible for creating differences between the Meiteis and the hill people by introducing vegetarianism and the concept of purity and impurity. He remarked that while the Brahmins could participate in the Lai-Haraoba festivals of the Meiteis without any hindrance, they were not allowed to participate in the Gouriya worship.

The 'Ima' of Khongman complained about the forcible adoption of Hinduism. She talked at length about the suppression of the Meitei religion during the time of Garibniwaz. But in the same breath she said that,

I have nothing against the Hindu religion. However, when I was about 33 years old, I dreamt of a '*tengba*' (representaiton of Pakhangba) who told me that the religion from the west will come to an end and we will start practising our old religion again. And now Brahmins also come and watch our ceremonies and prayers.

With this optimism, she has continued in her attempts to solve people's personal problems through coversations with the traditional Meitei gods/ancestors. As a result of the impact of Hinduism, tension grew between the hill people and the Meiteis. According to her, the reaction of the hill people towards the valley people is not exactly that of vengeance, but that of an elder brother chastising an errant younger brother.[43] According to her the present tension between the hill and plains to the time of Pamheiba/Garibniwaz who would use the hill people for scavenging work and as palanquin bearers and other harsh jobs. Any hill tribe who resisted paying tribute used to be mercilessly dealt with even by killing the *Khullakpa* (the chief of the tribe). The Meiteis as well as the hill people were able to feel free only at the time of Bodhchadra Maharaj, who freely allowed the practice of the traditional religion.

The Hill People

The Nagas and the Kuki-Chin groups mainly constitute the hill people of Manipur.

The sub-groups within the broad category of Naga are Tangkhul, Mao, Maram, Poumei, Zemei, Liangmei and Rongmei, Anal, Maring, Moyon, Monsang, Lamkang etc. They all speak languages belonging to the Tibeto-Burman group.

Among the various sub-groups of the Nagas, the Tangkhuls and the Kabuis have a special relationship with the Meiteis. The tribes belonging to Zemei, Liangmei and Rongmei are collectively called the Zeliangrong tribes and are also called Kabuis by the Meiteis. Some of the Tangkhuls believe that they are descendants of a dancer called *Tangkhu,* whose dance got royal patronage from the Meitei kings, the Kabuis meanwhile are said to have come from a cave, the entrance of which was opened by a *Mithun* (bull). Among the Tangkhuls and Kabuis too one finds the clan structure consisting of Ningthoujas, Khumans, Angom and Luwangs. The other clans, i.e.,

[43] The hill people are believed to be the elder brother of the valley/Meitei people. A myth associated with this belief is narrated in the earlier chapter.

the Moirangs, Chengleis, Khaba-Nganbas, are not heard of. However, it seems that the clan structure among them was adopted from the Meiteis.

The Kuki-Chin groups are the more recent migrants who mainly inhabit the southern parts of the state. Among the Kuki-Chin groups are the Thadou, Vaiphei, Paite, Simte, Ralte, Hmar, Zou etc. Smaller tribes like Kom, Chiru, Anal, Aimol etc. are linguistically close to the Kuki-Chin groups. Since these tribes had settled in the foothills close to the Meiteis, certain Meitei influences on these tribes are discernible. One of these tribes, the Koms also have a salai structure like that of the Meiteis, consisting of the Ningthoujas, Khumans, and Luwangs which are exogamous in nature.

All these hill tribes have now been declared Scheduled Tribes under the Constitution of India enjoying special privileges like reservation in government jobs etc.

Unlike the Meiteis who have their own script that was sought to be obliterated by the Brahmins, who introduced the Bengali script at the time of conversion to Hinduism and which has now been revived, the hill people do not have their scripts. Many Naga folk stories tell us that their scripts were written on animal's skin. They lost it when a dog ate it up. That is why they have no script, but have only oral tradition. An attempt, it was said, was being made to embroider the 'lost' scripts on the shawls, which each village weaves for itself. The design in each shawl in turn had become their motif to differentiate one group from the other tribes. They have now adopted the Roman script to write their language.

Nearly everybody whom I talked to said that they used to worship Sanamahi just like the Meiteis. The Goddess Leimaren was addressed as *Apui* (mother) by the Kabui, in the same manner in which the Meitei address her as Ima. *Atingkok* (Father Void) was addressed as *Lai Apokpa* (God ancestor), *Soraren/Asiba*'s (Sky God) worship was the main reason for the festival known as *Gang-Nai* among the Kabuis. The offerings to these gods consisted of animals, fish, wine and this offering was known as *yu-pan*.[44] The Lois, Chakpas, and Andros, who did not convert to Hinduism and were therefore made outcasts by the king, used to make similar offerings to these deities. It was only after Hinduism was adopted that the offerings of animals and wine were discarded as they constituted 'impure' (*Tamāsik*) elements

[44] '*Yu*' means liquor even in the Meitei language.

within the paradigm of Hinduism which considered only vegetarian offerings (*Satvik*) appropriate for their newly introduced gods. This, I think, was the beginning of the divide and the tension between the Meiteis and the hill people.

According to one Rongmei Naga,

Pakhangba is demonic and dangerous.[45] All illness and suffering is caused by this Pakhangba. Hence, he was to be appeased. In order to ward off sufferings one has to worship Pakhangba, for it is only when he is pleased that man will not suffer. The process of gratifying God Pakhangba is called *Chaban Thaba*, when a *khayom* is offered. Khayom is the package of offerings including rice, puffed rice, banana, *langthrei* (a kind of grass), *tingthou* (also a fine sharp grass), *pana* (betel leaf), seven fruits, and seven flowers. All the different forms of snakes are the *Chamchas*[46] of Pakhangba who act under the command of this dangerous god.

However, they also worship the Vishnu idol brought by the Burmese king as a gift to King Kyamba in Bishnupur. But they call it *Yangoi Ningthou* (probably king of Burma) and brother of Vishnu. They of course do not go inside the temple but worship the god collectively in their village for the production of good crop and offer pigs, chicken, goats, fish, etc. He felt that their tribe is different from the Meiteis only in food habits. Otherwise, they were all the same. According to him all these differences have come up because of Hinduism.

While the above respondent asserted the cultural unity between them and the Meiteis, another Naga from the Tangkhul tribe viewed his tribe as autonomous of the Meitei rule. According to him there was no effect of the Meitei kings on them. The Meitei king used to be treated with respect by the Tangkhul Khullakpa (chief) as the chief of another group but nothing more. Among the Nagas each village was a republic. Although the chief was selected according to hereditary factors he was not an absolute monarch. He always had to obey the village council members.

[45] Incidentally, while he was telling me his impressions of Pakhangba and other Meitei kings, two of my 'Meitei Hindu' friends got up and went out. On being asked later, they told me that they could not 'bear' to hear such things against their god.

[46] The respondent used this *Hindi* word, which means followers or subordinates, while explaining to me the attributes of Pakhangba.

He further says, 'According to the legend, the Tangkhuls and the Meiteis were brothers. Today most of the Meitei maichous (scholars) do not want to believe in it, so why should we?' According to him, the Meitei pundits discarded this earlier origin theory and like to trace their genesis from Arjuna of the Mahabharat and claim to have 'Aryan blood'.

I think that these kinds of remarks from the hill people about the Meiteis are more of a reaction to the Hinduization of the Meiteis. This process brought about a divide by which Hindu Meiteis started feeling ritually superior and categorized all the tribals as untouchables who according to them lead lowly lives by eating meat, drinking wine, and offering the same to their god, which the Meiteis themselves used to do before becoming Hindus.

According to one Meitei revivalist, no one in the interior also was spared from conversion to Hinduism. It has only been about fifty years since revivalism emerged in the interior areas. In the past, those Hindu Meiteis who invited to their social functions/ceremonies, any one following the old Meitei religion used to be ostracized by society. It was only during the reign of Bodhachandra Maharaj (1941–55), the last king to rule, that the Meiteis were able to practise their old religion unhindered. 'As Bodhachandra had "real" royal blood (of Khagemba and Pakhangba) he allowed the Meitei faith to be professed.'[47] What is important about this narration from our perspective is the emphasis given to the fact that Bodhachandra did not suppress traditional belief, because of his respect for his roots, his link with his original ancestor. The Hindu religion has been and is being practised in Manipur now for about 250 years, since the time of Pamheiba. According to this Meitei revivalist during these years the Meitei religion was also being practised, though not openly. Whoever did not agree to become Hindu openly was given low status in society and sent to the Loi villages.

The Lois

These non-convert Meiteis are spread over several villages, namely, Andro, Khurkhul, Awang Sekmai, Phayeng etc. Other lesser known Loi villages are Leimaram, Leimaram Khunou, Koutruk, Kwatha etc.

[47] This kind of emphasis on 'true' blood and descent to explain the conduct and behaviour of the kings even now, shows the deep rooted belief in their 'divine' ancestors.

Andro, famous for its coiled technique of pottery, is situated near the Nongmaijing hill, Khurkhul near the Koubru hills and Phayeng at the foot of the Kangchup hills. Awang Sekmai, the second largest scheduled caste village in Manipur, is situated near the National Highway No. 39 (the Imphal–Dimapur road).

Since these communities were part of the larger Meitei community before the advent and influence of Hinduism, they too have the seven salai structure, like the Meiteis.

According to some, those who got Loi status after Hinduism, were the Chakpas who were the earliest settlers of Manipur. They believe that they did not come from anywhere, they have been here since time immemorial and are the actual descendants of Soraran/Asiba (the Sky God) at the Koubru hill. Koubru hill is considered the first settlement even by other Meiteis.

According to their origin myth, the ancestors of the Chakpas and Andros were two brothers that once occupied Kangla. They were driven out by Pakhangba. Before leaving they decided to have a meal. The Phayeng Chakpa's ancestor cooked *Ngakra* (a kind of fish) and his younger brother cooked *Khajing* (prawn). The khajing took a long time to cook, so the Andro ancestor told the Phayeng ancestor to go ahead, and said that he would follow him later. But when the Andro ancestor finally followed he was unable to locate his elder brother, and returned. Thus he got his name Andro, a derivation from *Handro* (who returned). The Andro settlements are in the east while the Phayangs live in the west.

In the traditional text *Chakparol*,[48] there is a detailed account of the origin and later migrations of the Loi/Chakpa settlements. The Sekmais derive their name from Sengmai, which comes from the word Sengba, meaning pure.

Khurkhul is the only Loi community which does not claim to be the original settler of the present place. They trace their myth to the story of *Khamba* and *Thoibi*.[49] In this epic, Thoibi was exiled (*loi-thaba* in Manipuri) to Kabo (in Burma) for refusing to marry Nongban (the son of a noble), the villain of the story. When she was called back from exile (*loi-koukhatpa),* the chief of Kabo presented her fifteen slaves. She and the fifteen slaves proceeded on a journey

[48] An ancient text maintaining the records of Chakpas.

[49] The most popular love-lore from Moirang which is famous throughout Manipur.

after the ritual throwing of an egg. This egg fell and broke in the area belonging to *Ichum lairembi* at Khurkhul, where they had stopped. Their descendants have continued to stay here up to the present day and celebrate Lai-Haraoba, to please Ichum lairembi.

The term *loi* has got several meanings when used as an independent word, or, as a prefix or suffix, and is associated with being subdued, dependent, backward, or lowly placed. For example, *Loi thaba* means to be exiled to a Loi village or outside Manipur and *Loi hanba* means to return from exile. *Loi chanba* means to conquer a country, while *Loi kaba* means to pay tribute to the conquering power. *Loi pot* means a tribute in addition to the lallup services which were compulsory for everybody, except for the nobles and other privileged classes.

There are some scholars who say that the Lois were the people who were sent to exile as punishment. Thanga, Sugnu, Ithai, Chairel, Kumbi, and Arong etc. were some of the places where offenders were exiled.

As mentioned in the myths of Phayeng and Andro, they were driven out by Pakhangba from Kangla and were pushed to the periphery of the valley where they continue to reside.

When Pakhangba subjugated all other salais, most people accepted him as the ruler *'mayum taretki piba'* (ruler of the seven clans) and *Meitei* (me = people, tei = other), a composite term for all the clans came to used. But some people belonging to these clans refused to be absorbed, and hence were exiled, and had to pay tribute (Loi pot) to the king.

Probably, these people who were Lois at the time of Pakhangba became outcasts at the time of Pamheiba when they refused to embrace Hinduism, and retained their original identity.

People of Sekmai, Khurkhul, Andro, and Phayeng mainly belong to the Ningthouja, Angom, and Khuman salais. Some people who now want to adopt Hinduism go through the 'purification' rite called *penathokpa*, after which they are allowed to marry within the Hindu Meitei fold.

The Maharaj Kumars and Raj Kumars

Hindu religion also gave rise to one more phenomenon during the time of Pamheiba/Garibniwaz. The kings who used to be until then called Ningthous, became Maharajas and their consorts, Maharanis, their immediate descendants Maharaj Kumars and their affinal and

consanguinal relations, and even the children of their mistresses, Raj Kumars. This strata had a special status in society with special codes of interaction and specific terms of address for them.[50]

These terminological changes were one of the overt marks of growing centralization in the state structure. From a federal structure, power started travelling towards the centre. The nobles lost most of their power. All the important positions started getting allocated to the family members and/or relatives of the king. The state structure began to get controlled by one single family, and thus power struggles and attempts to overthrow kings became family feuds, which used to otherwise be seen as societal phenomena. People's participation became rare, and instead, an atmosphere of awe was built up, largely due to the imposition of an alien religion on the system of kingship.

'Maharaja' was hitherto an unknown and awe inspiring term for the people who regarded their king as the head of the family. It also sounded grand. 'Maharaj Kumars' and 'Raj Kumars' closely or distantly related to the king, became politically important. These people were termed *Nigthemchas* (king's sons) formally, to denote their pedigree. Before the time of Garibniwaz, the king was not necessarily chosen strictly by the rule of primogeniture, but broadly from the Ningthouja salai. By attaining political positions in the durbar, the king's sons and relatives, the Maharaj Kumars and Raj Kumars, entered a new area of influence and power. They built their own armies and emerged as a new power group posing a threat to the throne, which traditionally used to be a seat given to the person considered worthy of it, by the learned men and the nobles.

An *'Imasi'* (this is how a Raj Kumar's wife is addressed), of Sagolband area remembered seeing Maharaj Churachand and Maharaj Bodhachandra. Whenever she goes now to the palace she remembers the glorious days of the past and weeps looking at the deplorable condition of the contemporary political scene. Imasi's husband's grandfather was an officer in Maharaj Churachand's court. According to her, the old people remember vividly the grandeur and glory of those days, when the Maharaja was in power and when they had enjoyed certain privileges and occupied prestigious positions in the king's court.

[50] The descendents of such a pedigree even today are addressed with a specific honorific terminology and are given special seats in marriages, Lai-Haraoba, and other public functions.

According to custom, Raj Kumars attending the marriage ceremony of another Raj Kumar have to be presented a *Khudei* (a lower garment) over and above the usual marriage *dakshina*. These clothes have to be contributed by the bride's family in case the bride is married to a Raj Kumar, and by the grooms' family if a Raj Kumari is married to a groom of a non-RK (Raj Kumar) from another salai, which is usually the case.[51]

The Rajkumars (RK) and the Maharaj Kumars (MK) are a group within the Ningthouja salai, but all the members of the Ningthouja salai are not MKs and RKs. The title of MK was given to the progeny of the ruling king and one lost this title when the reign passed on to the hands of another person of the Ningthouja salai.

A woman marrying a Maharaj Kumar/Raj Kumar got the title *'Sija'*. After her marriage she was not allowed to cook food for the husband's family unless and until the *Makhoot Chaba* ceremony was performed. A feast was held and all the elderly male and female members of the RK/MK groups were invited. At the time of feasting the newly married woman served water. After that 'dakshina' was distributed and the woman bowed down to all the invitees. Thereafter, the woman could cook food for her husband's family. These marriages were inevitably hypergamous and the women getting married to MKs and RKs had to show their 'gratitude' for having been accepted into the fold of royalty.

If an RK/MK married a divorcee or a widow, no rituals were performed and she was not allowed the title Sija. But if he married a Brahmin, a tribal (hill people), or any Hindu girl from outside Manipur, he had to elope and marry. Later on, this marriage was accepted by the family. Such marriages were not arranged. But a tribal girl or other non-Hindu girl had to be first initiated into Hinduism and a purificatory rite called *Sagei Chak Khangba* was performed for her recognition and acceptance as a member of the RK/MK family.

Polygamy was and is still more prevalent among MKs/RKs,[52] but only the first wife was married with complete rituals. The other wives, though addressed as wives, were not ritually ordained.

[51] Since each salai is an exogamous unit and the Raj Kumars/ Raj Kumaris belong to only one salai, i.e., the Ningthoujas, they have to marry non-Raj Kumars/Raj Kumaris.

[52] Many in other salais also indulge in it.

If a Raj Kumari married a Brahmin or a Muslim, or a tribal boy, she automatically became an outcast and links with her were severed for ever.

Recalling his younger days and his forefathers' time, an RK from Sagolband recalled that,

> at that time, we were invited to every ritual and every feast, but nowadays we too have become commoners, but we are still called *Sanakhwa* (*Sana* means gold, and *Khwa* comes from *Khwai* which means for everyone, i.e., precious for everyone). Reassuring himself he said, 'Even now in every feast we are told to take the protocol seat. But nowadays we do not consider it our right. But the people still ask us to occupy the seat of precedence. When I am invited, many old people older than me, ask me to occupy the seat of precedence, but I would never accept it, why should I ? Why should I sit ahead of the old men? Nowadays, our society is very democratic. We are no longer a privileged class.

The Palace Ground area, where most of the MKs live and where the palace of the son of the last king is situated, still reflects the royal lifestyle and the royal architecture, and one can sense the aura of kingship that still exists in and around that area. But one can also see the erosion of royal wealth and splendour. The MKs living in that area are still venerated by the people. They still bow down, take off their foot-wear, and address them as 'Sanakhwa'. It seems that the people still want to assure them of their loyalty and gracefully accept their superiority because of the deep rooted belief in their ancestors and traditions.

Responding to my queries they replied, 'After all, they are the descendants of our great kings and treating them as commoners would be a disrespect to our traditions.'

Democracy has been accepted in the political realm, but kings and kingship are still placed at a higher realm, at the realm of their own lineage and their ancestors. Disregarding them would mean disregarding their history and their origin.

The Muslims

Muslims (called *Pangals* or *Pangans*) started settling in Manipur around the sixteenth and seventeenth century. The brother of King Khagemba revolted against him and went to Cachar (a border town of Assam) to seek military help. From there he got many Muslim soldiers under the leadership of one General Bimbol. But he was defeated by Khagemba and one thousand Muslim soldiers were

captured. King Khagemba allotted them specific areas like Lilong, Keirao, Sekta, Yairipok, Hafta etc. within the valley. They were given local Manipuri women in marriage and were allowed to settle in the state. They were also given specific yumnaks. Later, a record by the name of *Pangan Thorakpa* was maintained to record their migrations, ancestry, and activities. Their migrations have been recorded in other texts. However, they were not absorbed into the Meitei salai structure.

The extent of inter-marriage between Muslim men and Meitei women can be seen by the names of the present Manipuri Muslims, Khullakpam Khamba, Saheb Khanba Tomba, Basimayum Khungam, etc. Instead of Urdu names, which are used by the Muslims in other parts of India, they have got Meitei names. Lately, however, most of them have started using Urdu names.

They also used to worship the Meitei god Sanamahi and have only recently started adhering to the tenets of Islam more strictly. They have now opened Madarasas, institutions for teaching Islamic scriptures. All of them speak Meiteilon, the Meitei language, and only a handful know Hindi or Urdu.

According to the present generation Muslims, many of their ancestors held important positions in the army of Meitei kings, and fought bravely in the wars against Burma and later against the British, specially during King Gambhir Singh's reign. Many took part in the Anglo-Manipuri war of 1891 and laid down their lives.

They joined the lallup system, and like others, gave ten out of forty days to the services of the kings.

Although the wives of their ancestors were Meitei women, the Meiteis do not now like to marry into a Muslim family. Meitei women marrying Muslim men are looked down upon by Meitei Hindus, but as mentioned earlier, when Meitei men marry Muslim women, they are accepted after going through conversion and a purificatory rite.

They are considered a group apart, constituting their own-territory, with little social interaction with the Meiteis. However, elements of mutual animosity and hatred are by and large absent in both the communities.[53] The Muslims like the Brahmins, though not forming part of the sali structure of the Meiteis, have become an integral part of the Meitei society.

[53] As is witnessed in the Northern Indian belt.

The Mayangs

The first word which I as an outsider got familiar with on reaching Manipur was *'Mayang'*. This word denotes all those who come from the western direction and who do not belong to the Mongoloid stock. Almost everywhere I went, I was addressed as *mayang nupi* (woman from outside). Sometimes it just denoted the best reference one could give to outsiders, but at other times it carried with it a sense of resentment against outsiders.

Strangely, the Brahmins and even the Muslims who came from the west earlier, who did not have Mongoloid features were not given this term. They were made an integral part of Manipuri society, though not part of the salai structure.

The term mayang was originally used for the people of Cachar and Tripura, who came and settled in Manipur and called themselves 'Bishnupriyas'. Their origin and genealogies were maintained during the reign of Gambhir Singh and completed during the rule of his son, Chandrakirti in a text that was called *Kalisharon.* These people were called *Mayang Kalisha* and were later christened as Bishnupriyas with the ritual of the sacred thread (*Janehoo*) by King Gambhir Singh.

To the south of the Cachar plains, down to the Chittagong hill tracts a large number of people belonging to the fishing community from Bengal had settled and because of their dark complexion were called *Kalichhaya* (black shadow). They had a non-Mongoloid appearance and had no knowledge of the Manipuri language. The word Kalisha, we were told, is derived from Kalichhaya.

Most of the Meiteis who call these Bishnupriyas, Mayangs explained that though they had lived for such a long period of time in this place (Manipur), they could not fully pick up the native language, whereas the Brahmins and Muslims were able to adopt Meiteilon (Manipuri language) as their own language very soon. They were worshippers of Goddess Kali and not of Vishnu as the name suggests. They got the name Bishnupriya only after King Gambhir Singh conferred it on them. At present a large number of the Bishnupriyas are settled in the Cachar area.

In other words, the term Mayang was given to those immigrants, who did not adopt Manipuri as their language and did not intermix culturally with the larger society.

Later the term Mayang was used pejoratively and came to reflect the injured and exploited feeling that the Manipuris had toward the outsiders. This feeling grew when the British invaded Manipur and won the last war in 1891 and brought with them a number of outsiders to run the administration.

Ironically, this was accentuated further with the attainment of independence and the consequent merger of this princely state with India under controversial circumstances. Inevitably, many non-Manipuris came to be posted in Imphal to run the administration. The state which was ruled on the basis of belief upon the benign blessings of the ancestors and the divine kings was suddenly in the hands of 'outsiders'. It made the Manipuris feel that they were no longer their own masters. This resentment to outside administrators gradually affected their attitude to outsiders in Manipur in general.

Later Marwaris (from Rajasthan) and other trading communities, Punjabis, mainly Sikhs from Burma initially and then later from Punjab started taking control of the retail outlets in the markets. The Biharis also came, doing odd jobs including pulling cycle rickshaws, etc.

All these later migrants, and the officials in the administration, did not mix with the local population. They made their houses in and around the market area and lived in clusters. They did not participate in local festivals and did not go to houses in their locality to encourage social interaction. They learnt the minimum required of the Manipuri language to converse, to conduct their business or office work. Socially and economically they regarded the Manipuris as backward and primitive. In turn they were perceived by the Manipuris as the ones who extracted money from Manipur and invested it in turn in their own respective states.

All these factors and attitudes added to the resentment building up among the already insulted Manipuris. As a result, all Mayangs became the symbol for invasion, exploitation, people who controlled the economy, and most importantly, people who had no respect for the rich ethnic heritage of the Manipuris.

To sum it up, they felt, 'exploited'. This feeling has given rise to many revolutionary and separatist groups, some of these are trying to revive their ancient Meitei belief, while others are demanding independence from the Indian Union.

Ambiguities in Status Differentiation: The Peripheral Hindus

Meiteis started calling themselves Hindus from the eighteenth century onwards. They worship Radha-Krishna and celebrate with gaiety all the festivals related to the lives of this divine couple. In their rites of passage they have adopted the life cycle rituals of the Brahmins and added these to their already existing rituals. They have been given Kshatriya status in the caste hierarchy, which is the only element of the caste system present in this society apart from the Brahmins.

If we go through the works on Hinduism, the inevitable trajectory traces the origin of the caste system, the different castes and the religious role of the rest of the castes in relation to the Brahmins and then the description of certain Brahminical texts such as the Vedas, Puranas, Dharmashastra, etc. According to Dumont the religious principle gets articulated in the Indian case in terms of the opposition of purity and impurity. For Dumont, as well as for Max Weber, the Brahmins represent the highest form of purity attainable by Hindus.[54] Whenever Hinduism is discussed it is, first of all, predominantly a Brahminical view, (Dumont *et al.*) and secondly, it is always intrinsically premised on the caste system. Therefore, Hinduism and caste-system have become inseparable.

Caste, according to Weber, is about the imposition of ritual rights and duties and the position of Brahmins. It is the fundamental institution of Hinduism. 'Without caste there is no Hindu.'[55]

However, a researcher with a knowledge of Hinduism from such a perspective will find a different situation while studying the Meitei Hindus. The difference is born out of the fact that Hinduism in Manipur is not the base for the evolution of its social categories. The hierarchy of different strata do not correspond to the ascriptive hierarchy given in the caste system. The Brahmins came from Orissa, Bengal and other parts of India to spread the message of Hinduism. They are the late migrants who were given a place in the Meitei social

[54] L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste system and its Implications,* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1980.

[55] M. Weber, *The Religion of India,* Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale (trans. and ed.), The Free Press, New York, 1958.

structure under state patronage. Meiteis of all the seven salais converting to Hinduism were given Kshatriya status, people who did not convert were assigned the status of outcasts, the Lois. But the concept of untouchability assigned to the Shudras could not make inroads in relation to the Lois. Nor could the hierarchy inherent in the caste system—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras (in that order) strike a parallel form in the Meitei social structure. In fact, hierarchy was based only on the basis of royalty—the kingship principles, and that too was not rigid. People were the most important opinion makers and no king could rule without the consent of the people.

The division of labour in society was not based on birth, but on age and closeness to the king. Unlike the caste system, interaction at all levels was possible. At the base of salai structure was the rule of exogamy implying an equal status assigned to all of them. This was perhaps the reason why the Brahmins could not convert each salai into a caste category, (since it would then necessitate hierarchy) and instead assigned all of them the Kshatriya status.

In fact, this society does not seem to have a clear-cut hierarchy. We can distinguish different exclusive groups and communities, but can not place them in a neat hierarchical set-up within the salai structure. All the salais had the same status, except the categories of MKs and RKs whose higher status was marked by some additional rituals conducted during the marriage ceremonies and the special honorific terms addressed to them, which was also a recent historical phenomenon. The Brahmins were also entitled to being addressed with specific respectful terms but besides that we could not get any indication that they were thought to enjoy higher status in the society. Hence the society comprised of Meiteis, Brahmins, Muslims, Lois, the hill people and Mayangs. All these communities can be categorized as 'separate but equal'. Whatever the differential status or prejudices and biases that were observed they were not of an ascribed nature but generally rooted in historical events. The prejudice against the Lois was because they had refused to become Hindu and were consequently declared outcasts by the king. And the prejudice against the Mayangs was because they had settled in Manipur without incorporating the indigenous culture. Lastly, the Hinduism of the Meiteis did not bind them to the Hindu communities outside Manipur and nor to the ones living in Manipur, since the Meitei brand of Vaishnav Hinduism existed exclusively in the domain

of religion, while Hinduism as practised by the rest of Indian society, was intrinsically enmeshed in the entire social structure. The Meiteis can, therefore, be considered a Hindu society, if one looks at the overt symbols of their festivities, and yet believers of their own 'Meitei' faith, if the covert gestures of their faith are analysed.

4

Belief System

The Origin

Atingkok (Father Void), the infinite expanse, which embraces all within him and *Amamba*, the supreme infinite darkness, combined into *One*, are the starting points of all manifestations. They are the expressions of the ultimate reality. When these two manifestations combine into one the whole process of generation takes place. They are primal and external and cannot be consumed by even the devastation of fire at the end of *Chak* (time). Time appears to be real in the world of manifestations. When all disappears into the Supreme One, there is no manifestation, no space, as all are within Him.

Atingkok is the originator of all the seven Meitei salais. Meitei belief about their social structure starts from the origin of the origins, from the combination of the two opposite forces—the life giving source and the all pervasive darkness/nothingness. The basis of their social structure rests on the belief in the cyclical concept of their origin. The process of coming out and then returning to this entity is the universal process of life, death, and rebirth of all things and beings, divine or human. Later, with the formation of the composite Meitei society these attributes were given to Pakhangba (the ancestor of Mangang/Ningthouja salai), whose motif of a dragon with the tail in its mouth, symbolized that the universe starts and ends within him.

In order to create the world of living beings, Atingkok[1] manifested himself in the form of two beings. His right side became Atiya Sidaba (the Sky God) and his left became Leimaren Sidabi (the Mother Earth/Malem). They became the supreme *Pa* (father) and *Pi* (mother) for the whole world, the supreme male and female principles. In the

[1] *Amamba* being subsumed within this being.

Meitei social space, the right side is assigned to the males while the left side is assigned to females.[2]

The abode of these two manifestations is at the Koubru hills, which is also considered to be the place of origin of the Meiteis.

Awang Koubru Ashuppa
Laiyam Khunda Ahanba
Sanalik Mapal Thadringei
Sanalik Mapal Thariba
Nongthrei Mawoo Lingdringei
Nongthrei Mawoo Lingliba,

is a song describing the reverence people have for this hill. It means, 'Koubru peak to the north is the highest place where gods made their foremost habitation, and created different orders of living beings. Gods are the roots from which living beings bloom like flowers.'

Atiya Sidaba, who is also one of the stars in the Meitei cosmology, and Leimaren, assigned the task of creating the creatures and human beings to their elder son Asiba who was later assigned the name *Sanamahi* (made of gold).[3] The way that gold is the most precious of all metals,[4] similarly Sanamahi is considered most essential for the existence of all living beings. He is the spirit dwelling inside each being. He is, therefore, worshipped regularly with awe and reverence by each household. The mother manifestation in the form of Leimaren is also worshiped alongside in the form of an earthen pot, filled with water, its mouth being covered with a white cloth and a string of leaves tied around its neck.

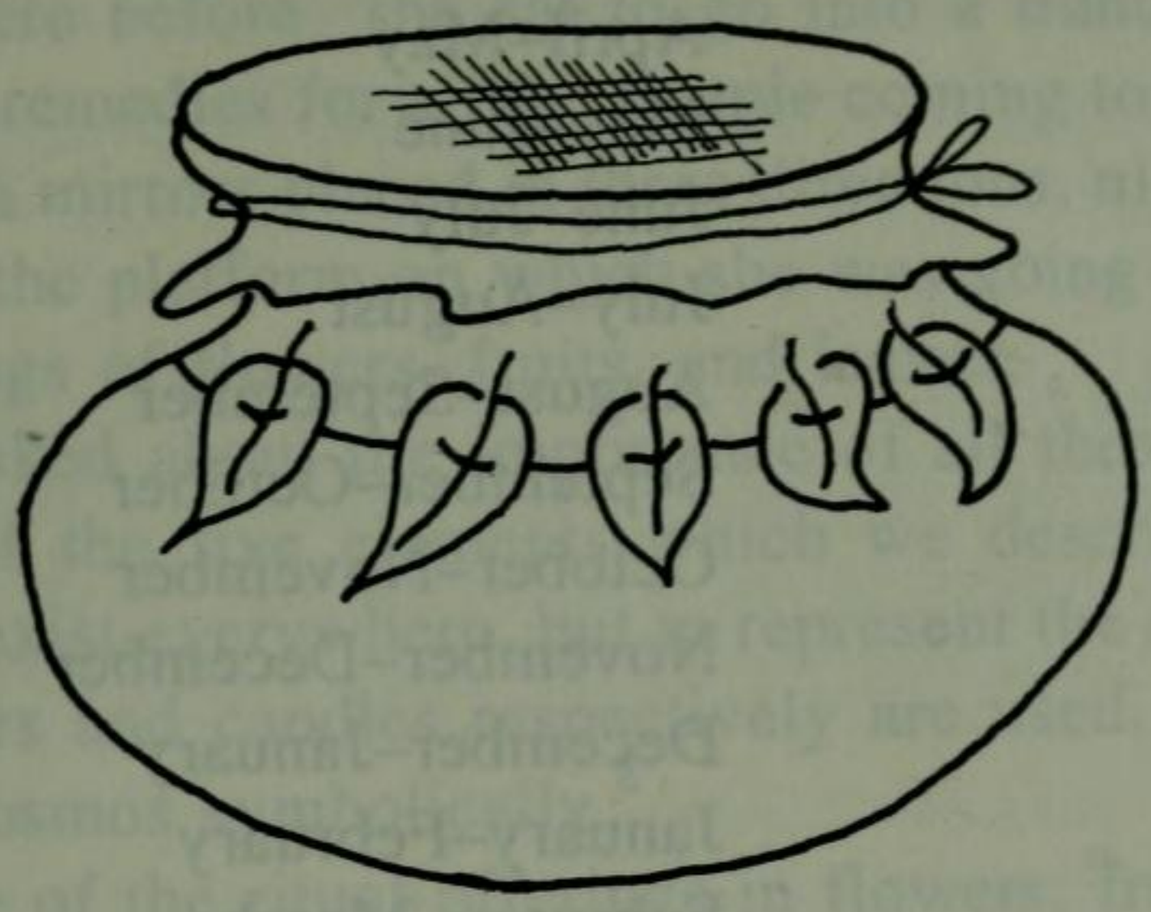
Between Atiya Sidaba (The Father Sky) and Leimaren (Mother Earth) are the three mighty forces of fire, air, and water. The whole universe is but a product of the interplay of these primal elements according to the cosmic principle.

It is the combination of these forces and the *Mi* (shadow) which creates the universe and also the human beings. According to one Maiba (male priest), whom I addressed as Ipal (a from of address for an elder male), the functions of these elements inside our body,

[2]This concept will be further discussed in the fertility principle later in this chapter.

[3]He is considered the essence of all living beings. He is the household deity of the Meiteis.

[4]It is also symbolized as a male principle.



Symbolic representation of goddess Leimaren

as well as outside in the atmosphere, are the same. So long as the equilibria of these elements are maintained, one remains in good health. But, when the elements present inside our body becomes weaker than those outside our body, we become weak and fall ill.[5] This experience of falling ill is called '*Lai-Oknaba*' which means to be possessed by the spirit of the deity. Therefore, when we go out in a weakened state and happen to encounter a 'bad spirit' or an 'evil' force, we are actually encountering some external force of nature, which is much greater than that inside our body, which our body cannot resist because of its weakened condition. The same thing seems to happen with the state structure. Whenever there is turmoil in the state, it is because of the weak base of the state which is over-powered by outside forces or the 'evil' forces, like rebellions, wars, etc. It is only when the base of the state structure is made stronger that balance and harmony are resumed.[6]

'Let me tell you another thing', Ipal said to me 'the moon is the father and the sun is the mother, according to Meitei philosophy. (The lunar months mentioned in the Meitei calendar are given on the next page.)

The soul stays for two months in the father's tent and then is transferred to the mother's tent. During the whole process of the generation of a child, it stays for ten months in the mother's tent,

[5]The basic principle of the traditional Meitei medicinal treatment.
[6]This was the perception given by my respondents.

Meitei months	*Correspondence to Gregorian months*
Sajibu	April–May
Kalen	May–June
Inga	June–July
Ingen	July–August
Thavan	August–September
Langban	September–October
Mera	October–November
Hiyangei	November–December
Poinu	December–January
Wakching	January–February
Phairen	February–March
Lamta	March–April

and two months in the father's. It is actually not the developmental process in the medical sense but it is, in the Meitei philosophy, the transition of the energy (soul) from one star to another.

The transition of each soul need not follow the same stars. Every individual soul has its own path, which can be identified by the scholars.[7]

Ipal of Khongman concluded this argument by saying that,

> whatever there is in external form has its own determination in our bodies; it is an organic entity. The external life and the internal life—an external mirror and an internal process, these two constitute all the essence. The mundane external forms that we see do not define the true meaning, but once it is reflected inside our bodies, conceived in our organic system, and drawn into us, then the philosophy is complete. Hence, the relation amongst our bodies, the earth, and the cosmic energies needs to be studied in depth.

A combination of fire, air, water, sky, and earth creates the human body (water is blood, air is soul); and in addition to these five elements there is a sixth one, the *mi* (shadow). The shadow image is the Tengban Mapu Atingkok (Father Void). When hair is tied in a knot on the forehead it is a male character, whereas if the same is placed at the back of the head, it indicates a female character. Each character is being represented in the shadow image which constitutes one of the six elements of the creation. The existence, the continuity of 'life', depends on these elements combined together.

[7]Maybe that is why stars are consulted in reading horoscopes.

In the 'durbar' of the Khongman Ima, I saw certain objects which were placed there before she sat to go into a trance to predict the future and find remedies for all the people coming to her. There were three full-length mirrors placed in three directions, nine candles burning in front of the platform on which she was going to sit, and some selected offerings of flowers, fruits, and leaves.

On being asked about the importance of all these objects, I was told that out of the five elements which we described earlier, air, sky, and earth exist everywhere, but to represent the element of water and fire, mirrors and candles respectively are used. It is an attempt to create the cosmos symbolically.[8]

The essence of the ritual offerings in flowers, fruits, leaves, fire, etc., is that all these elements signify the character, the identity of the particular deity. When we offer each of these elements, we appreciate the different elements of the deity, we enter into her very being. So, when we say that we met a particular spirit, or we are possessed by that spirit, we are told to offer particular types of flowers to get cured. This is done because the colour, and hence the character and function of the flower, indicates and is identified with that spirit or god.

The offering is made in such a way that it enters into the very being of the deity and establishes a link. All these flowers, fruits, fire, etc., are elements of this being.[9] That is the reason why the respective ancestors of the seven salais require different modes of offerings. Each respective offering collectively represents each respective ancestor. This is the reason why some flowers and fruits which are offered to one particular salai are forbidden for other salai deities. If one wants to know who *Nongthang*[10] is, then one should look into the colour philosophy of the flowers, the number of petals, and details of other kinds of offerings. If one knows the symbolic meaning behind each offering, 'which only the great scholars know', one can understand the essence of each deity.[11]

The method of understanding the symbolic meaning of each offering, and thereby identifying the deity, is also the way to cure a

[8]Whatever exists inside the body should be represented in the atmosphere around. Only then is the cosmos completed and only then can one reach the divine.

[9]See chart: 'Salai and their mode of worship' in Chapter 3.

[10]Name of the deity.

[11]Such is the level of mysticism involved even in the simplest of offerings.

person from the spirit of that deity, which is causing illness to the person. After identification, a prayer is conducted which is as follows:

Since we have identified you, We have attempted to please you, Satisfy you in all possible ways, So, please forsake tormenting the person, and cure him of his ailments.

The crux of the philosophy is to go to the primal source, the birth site of these energies, and bring out solutions by understanding the origin and establishment of the whole cosmos, which is generated by the union of the universal *Pa* (male) and *Pi* (female) principles.

Lai-Haraoba

One of the best examples of the belief in going back to primal energies that the Meiteis have is evidenced from the enactment of *Lai-haraoba*. After the creation of the earth, Asiba,[12] wondered how to create the living beings that would inhabit the earth. Seeing him at a loss, *Atiya Sidaba* (the Father Void) opened his mouth and showed him inside his mouth all the living beings that were to be created. Asiba was overjoyed and shouted *'hoi, hoi*, which came to be known as *Lai hoi laoba* (shouting of hoi by the lai i.e., the deity), and came to be known as lai-haraoba, also meaning 'pleasing the deity'.

Lai-haraoba is conducted in different regions at different times normally between April and July. In all the different regions, the theme of creation is the essential element to start the festivities and rituals, which go on for four to five days.

Through enactments, the beginning of life from its conception in the mother's womb, birth, the making of a house after birth, and starting a settlement, the cultivation of land, the weaving of clothes, the dance in a serpentine track (*Lairel mathek*) that represents the regeneration and continuation of the civilization, are shown.

The spirit of the *lai*/deity is evoked from a pond or a river which is called *Lai-Ekouba.*

For the success of Lai-haroaba and for the prosperity of the state three kinds of offerings with specific kinds of materials are made to the Sky God (Pa) who lives nine layers above the sky and Mother Earth (Pi) who lives seven layers below the earth. The first offering is that of '*yu*' (rice beer) in nine bamboo containers for the

[12]Another name of Sanamahi, the household deity.

Lainingthou[13] (God king/Sky God) and in seven bamboo containers for *Lairembi* (God Mother/Mother Earth). It is called *Lairai-yu-Khangba.* The second offering includes seven layers of banana leaves containing rice, eggs, and three lotus buds tied together with *paya* (bamboo strips). For the male *lai* the offerings face downwards and are tied with nine strands, and for the female *lai*, they face upwards and are tied with seven strands. This offering is termed *Khuyom Lakpa*[14]

The third offering is called *Konyai Hunba.* It is the offering of gold and silver pieces, which are thrown into the pond, praying to the Father Sky asking him to come down from nine layers of the sky and to the Mother Earth to come up from seven layers of the earth, to have divine copulation inside the pond. It is from here that the spirit of the *lai* is then called up and taken back in a pompous procession. The people shout with joy on the success of the divine copulation, describing in detail the fore-play which lead to this consummation.

These are the three offerings or the elements with which the two *lais* were identified. Since they were identified, they were also pleased, and through their divine copulation, they were believed to bless the state and the people with prosperity. According to Pundit Achouba (the chief priest of the Meitei faith) there is a belief that, 'if *Lai-haraoba* is performed improperly, without following the correctly prescribed rituals, and merely for merry-making, it will bring disorder, misery and death to the country'.

The importance of the success of lai-haraoba was seen as directly linked, first of all, with the prosperity of the state and only then to the prosperity of individuals. It was, and still, can be seen as, an appeasement of the ancestors for the welfare of the whole state. Even today the major theme of all the lai-haraoba is to request the gods to bless the country with prosperity. An individual's prosperity is seen as related to it, and hence is secondary. It can be termed as a 'state ritual' (prior to Hinduism), which asserts a belief in the ancestors looking after their children down below. As stated earlier, it is

[13]This title refers to Atiya Sidaba.

[14]Symbolic representation of this kind portrays the male god as the giver and the female god as receiver—the sexual coition resulting in generation of all living beings.

also the best example to show the Meitei belief of going back to the origin of origins.

After the successful copulation by the divine *Pa* and *Pi*, the maibi[15] initiates the enactment of the creation of the child in the mother's womb. The maibi will shout, 'To thy servants of Lainingthou and Liarembi, Let's create the human anatomy'. The group responds, 'Hoi' (yes). Then the maibi will lead the group in enacting the formation of human anatomy. The creation of each and every part of the body is demonstrated through sixty four *Khutheks* (hand movements). It starts by placing the hands on the navel. This symbolizes that energy is passing through the placenta to the navel of the foetus, hence making it a life form.[16] Beginning from the life source, the hand movements show the formation of the roof of the head, the forehead, till they reach the toe nails, then the lines under the toes and the arches of the feet, and at the end the maibi gives finishing touches to the entire body.

After completing the formation of the human body, the maibi requests Atiya Sidaba (Sky Father) to put the soul in. The last hand movement shows the transmission of the soul to the body.

Next, begins the task of bringing the child out into the world, and with that starts the enactment of labour pains, the portrayal of the role of the midwife, the birth of the child, cutting off of the placenta, bathing and wrapping of the child, naming of the child by the father, an enactment of breast-feeding, his limb movements, and dressing him as he grows up.

The third stage is the building of the house for the child who is now grown up and has become the lord of the people. Each detail of the house construction is enacted through *Jagoi* (dance) and then the house is dedicated to the lord, who is the son of the supreme *Pa* and *Pi*.

To please the god (the child) and for the prosperity of the land, goddess *Panthoibi* is appeased by performing the *Panthoibi Jagoi*.[17]

[15]The woman priest who is the director of the whole set of ritual enactments in lai-haraoba.

[16]The placenta is seen as the pipeline of the life source, even in the state ritual of coronation. it is symbolized by a pipeline on which the crown prince walks to reach the royal seat at Kangla.

[17]A dance form meant for the prosperity of the land.

The whole creation myth is enacted, by the people of the area where lai-haraoba is being performed, by following the instructions of the maibi (priestess). The collective performance and active participation by all, strongly asserts the belief of the Meiteis in their origins. The repetition of this performance again and again by the enthusiastic performers/people helps them respect their past for a prosperous future. Since, according to them, it is only by going back to the deep primal energies, the origins, that one can understand the whole process, and it is only then that the whole psychological and physical healing takes place.

Fertility Principles

The Meitei belief about origins and regeneration emphasizes the process of copulation, especially the divine copulation, for the prosperity and generation of the society. The Male and the Female principles are seen as creators, who work jointly to create this society. The belief is so ingrained in people's mind, that it is reflected even in the day to day attire.

The Manipuri dress for women is a stripped *phanek*, a wrap-around from the waist down to the ankles. In olden times married women used to wear it from above the breasts, and it used to come down below the knee. They wrap around their upper bodies with a *phi* (a cotton or a silk shawl). Both phanek and phi have two equal halves which are sewn together horizontally. Even the Meitei male dhoti (*Khudei*) which was usually black in colour, used to be stitched in the middle to join the two halves. After the advent of Hinduism, this male-dhoti was abandoned. The Meitei Hindu males started wearing a white dhoti which is one piece of cloth, not stitched from any side. But the Meitei women, though converted to Hinduism, continue to wear their traditional phanek and phi.

I asked the women why they took two halves and then stitched the two together, instead of using one whole piece of cloth. Some of them said that this way they felt that they had worn clothes, rather than mere wrap arounds. The former, according to them was a symbol of civilization. Some others said, that since all the materials were hand woven, the weaving loom could only weave half of the breadth needed, and so two pieces were stitched to meet the requirements. Then there were some maibis (traditional priestesses) who told us that the dress which women wear, and which the Meitei men also

used to wear traditionally, indicates, that the one who was wearing the dress was a creator; one who could give birth, and the ideology underlying this was that men and women together created the *Malem* (world).

The two parts indicate the male and female concepts. These two parts when they merge together create a new being. On being sewn together a united and a whole universe is created. This is reiterated in every kind of dress, to indicate the male/female concept.

During the month of *lamta* (March), the *Sharoi Khangba* is performed.[18] During this month, this ritual is performed on the first and the second Saturdays, to appease the deities for the collective health and welfare of the community. The elderly women of the area collect the offerings from each household and offer them to the deities. No one can go to the area where offerings are being made.[19] Once the place is chosen, it is considered sacred and is barred to all people except the ones directly concerned with the rituals. It is believed that the ancestors come down, being pleased by the respect shown by their descendants, engage in 'divine' copulation, enjoy their food, and go back to heaven.

This divine copulation is considered a blessing to the community and symbolizes the long life of the community acquired through the greater generative power given to them by their ancestors.

There is also the concept of *Til* and *Lai*, also called *Tilram-Lairam* in this practice of *Sharoi Khangba.* According to one priest,

If we observe minutely, we will come to know that 'Til', which is also referred to as 'worm' is the Father, while 'Lai' refers to the mother. *Til* symbolizes the phallus, it is the male phallic symbol; while Lai is the female *Yoni* symbol, and the area kept secluded is the area where their union takes place. This is the area where the offerings are made for the health and welfare of the community. We choose a certain area, which by tradition has been accepted and understood, as the area where the deities will congregate, and that is the area where Til and Lai are united.

The main elements in Lai-haraoba also emphasize the same theme. The beginning of the Lai-haraoba is marked by the copulation of the Sky Father and Mother Earth. The success of this divine copulation is marked by joyous shouts by the people. It is declared openly. The

[18]Collective ritual for the entire community.

[19]This is not a defined area. It may be any place which is secluded, or may be even in the middle of the road.

offerings to the Sky Father and Mother Earth also emphasize the phallic symbols. While the offering to the Sky Father faces downwards, the offering to Leimaren faces upwards connoting the sexual union between the two.

The maibi enacts the role of Mother-Earth being seduced by the Sky-Father; she shouts and performs *maibi-jagoi*[20], while the women in the procession shout:

The phanek of the maibi has fallen,
Her breasts are shivering,
Her genitals are exposed
This is not what we are saying,
But this is what the god is saying.

These, otherwise forbidden words, become a very pronounced part of the chorus sung loudly by the women. The act of copulation, moves from a private individual affair into the domain of social celebration, is openly declared by the congregation.

Maibi is the most uninhibited woman during these festivities. While dancing and narrating the birth of the child, she herself pulls up her phanek, moves her head in between her thighs to see whether the baby is coming out though, of course, symbolically, with no element of vulgarity involved in the process.

The generative principles is therefore believed to be the basis for the prosperity of the whole community and hence becomes the core around which Meitei belief, ritual and life revolve.

Even in an essentially political process, that of *Phambal-Kaba* (Coronation of the king), the copulation between the king and the queen was seen as an integral part of the whole process without which the king could not sit on the throne and be called a king.

The king the queen were seated in the *Laptanka* (central room), which faced the spot where the eternal mother, *Leimaren* was installed, in whose womb (house) the household thrived. The maibi sang *Sana lamok*, a song, drawing the spirit of the ancestor (Pakhangba) in the shape of a coiled snake into the body of the king, to give him the sexual energy and generative power to produce a male progeny. The maiba performed a rite called *Kasa-Khaiba*, to remove the evil influences, just before the queen was impregnated.[21] Then

[20]A specific dance form of the maibis.
[21]People desiring male children perform this rite till today.

the king and queen were left alone to indulge in sexual intercourse for five days.

The completion of this ritual was considered important for the prosperity of the whole society.

The Maibas and the Maibis

An RKs immediate response was, 'No, maibis are not propagators of traditional Meitei faith. They have also embraced Gauriya Vaishnavism.[22] Their profession, simply is to teach us how to pray and dance before the god. It is believed that they have the power to tell the future of a person. But I don't believe them'.

An elder from the Sapam sagei in Sagolband, expressed doubt about entirely disbelieving the maibas and the maibis, even though he asserted his strong faith in 'Gopaldevji' (God Krishna) and his complete distrust in Meitei faith.

A maibi in Bishnupur did not face any problems from her husband, when she became a maibi. She did not have any problem in social interaction. She was invited to Hindu festivals, even though she did not participate in any Hindu worshipping. There was no problem in the process of social interaction for her children. Even while being the children of a maibi did not hinder their marriage prospects. There was no social stigma attached to this profession. The eldest daughter of this maibi had a slight inclination toward becoming a maibi, but the family discouraged her, not because of any social stigma, but the family was simply not interested in having another maibi in the house. But their attempts failed. She neither became a maibi, nor did she remain totally aloof from its spell. She became emotionally unstable.

Explaining the process of becoming a maibi, she said,

> When we show certain symptoms, have convulsions, show a particular dislike to certain food items, go out of the house roaming aimlessly, hear the sound of a flute, we are directed by the god to go to our respective Ima-Guru.[23] This Ima-Guru is not assigned by any body, but we are "directed" to her, without our being conscious of it. In the course of training we are taught dancing, singing, etc., but are never taught *Lairon* (the language of god),

[22]The form of Hinduism adopted by the Meiteis.

[23]A head 'maibi' who trains novice maibis in the art of conducting rituals and performing traditional dance.

which we learn ourselves, through the power given to us by god, so that we can converse with him. The process of becoming a full fledged maibi after the completion of the training is called 'Laikhai Taba'. After this we return to our normal state, and only get possessed when the *Lai* (god) wants us to. Without a complete training, a woman trying to become a maibi will go mad, just like my daughter.

After becoming a maibi, such a person is allowed to take food like any other person. However, they are prohibited from eating Ngakra[24]. They also can not use certain trees/plants as firewood, for example, Nonglei Shangou, Khiklei, Heimang, etc. They can not take fire from lit fireplace, instead, they have to light their own fire by friction.

According to her if prohibited food and articles are used or consumed, the maibis tend to suffer from acute body pain, uneasiness, causing restlessness.

'Maibi' according to Pundit Achouba is a kind of divine illness. It is said to start with uninhibited talking. If such a person is not trained to say the right things, she could go mad. They can not be cured by doctors or Vaidyas but he (Pundit Achouba) can treat them. It is supposed to be a very painful and unhappy situation. Maibis' hair get locked as in *Jataas* (matted hair); they develop some kind of a lump in the abdomen which the surgeons fail to find in order to remove. All these symptoms are thought to be curable through *lairen puba* (purification process) of *laikhai-taba* (complete training). Once they get 'possessed' by the *Lai* (god), they acquire incredible strength. At such a time, even a number of persons cannot control a single maibi.

The maibis belong to mainly three salais—Mangang, Luwang, and Khuman and are represented by their respective salai colours. They are Shanglen, Nongmai, and Phura, respectively. These three groups have different languages. The deity of the Shanglen group will only possess the maibi of its own group, and if a maibi of another group wants to talk to the deity of Shanglen, the deity will not listen to her and go away. Hence the *Lairon* (language) for all the three groups is different, so that each maibi can converse with only the deity of her own group.

A Shanglen maibi will always look for an Ima-guru belonging to the Shanglen group, in fact she will be automatically led to the

[24]A black fish with whiskers.

Ima-guru of that particular group. There is a hierarchy among these three groups. First cames Shangleng, then Nongmai, and then Phura. Shanglen is a very raregroup. Shanglen will look after *Pakhangba* (Mangang's ancestor), Nongmai will look after Yumjao Lairembi (household goddess), and Phura will look after Nongshaba.

Maibi Groups

	Maibis	Hierarchy	Salai	Deity worshipped/taken care of
(1)	Shanglen	Top position	Mangang	Pakhangba
(2)	Nongmai	Middle position	Luwang	Yumjao Lairembi
(3)	Phura	Lowest position	Khuman	Nongshaba

These three groups are trained differently. The puja of Sanamahi[25] is performed by the Shanglen maibi. If either of the other two groups perform the rituals and offer flowers to this deity in any house, that particular house is said to face chaos. These three groups stay in different places, have different training, and acquire different *Lairon* (language of god). They themselves can not change their group.

The maibis have to look after the deities since they are chosen by them.

Asserting his faith in the institution of maibis, Pundit Achouba said, 'Maibis can foretell things which occur suddenly, without any prior apprehension or expectation. We should listen to what they say while they predict'.

According to him the maibis[26] predicted a civil war in the state. The sign by which they could foretell this was that a few days back they saw a *Haonubi* (an old tribal woman) selling three bunches of *hangam* (mustard leaves) in front of the Governor's bungalow near the Kangla.[27] If at anytime, anyone is seen selling anything, even *biris*[28] near the Governor's bungalow, it is an ominous sign.

[25]The household deity regarded as brother of Pakhangba; belongs to the same salai, i.e., Mangang.

[26]In the beginning of the year 1992.

[27]The area where the Governor's bungalow presently stands is considered a sacred place.

[28]Tobacco rolled in dry leaves used for smoking.

He asserted his point by citing an actual incident. Before the outbreak of World War II an old woman was seen selling bunches of *biris* near the same place. Nobody knew from where she came. After some days Manipur was bombed by the Japanese.

Even a man can become a maibi. The male maibis used to wear a *pheijom* (a kind of dhoti) earlier, but now-a-days they also wear phanek, specially at the time of the Lai-haraoba.

Hence, maibi, generally females, but also sometimes males means a person in whom the deity resides, whenever she or he is possessed. Even a male maibi gets possessed. When the maibis get possessed, they become oblivious to their surroundings. They wander around the jungles, but never get hurt. Whenever they hear the sound of a drum, they become totally lost.

The relationship between a maibi and a Lai (god) is not of the kind which exists in the case of *devadasis*,[29] contrary to the conclusions of some Manipuri scholars.[30] Maibis in no sense serve the menfolk sexually, neither are they married to god. They are merely a medium or messenger through whom the gods transmit their message. Also, the fact that males also becomes maibis, makes this comparison rather far-fetched. A Maibi may portray the sexual relationship of the gods during Lai-haraoba, and at no stage does she/he actually marry the god. The relationship that exists between god and maibi is more in terms of friendship, and this relationship is only with god and not with humans.

When kingship was prevalent in society, the kings used to listen to what the maibi had to say. They could not afford to disregard or neglect what they predicted. Such was the importance of the maibis.[31]

Maibis are functionally divided into two categories:

(a)	*Wangon Shang*	*da*	*Angangbu*	*Ngaibi*
	(house)	(in)	(for the child)	(who waits)

[29]An institution that is predominant in south India, according to which women are married to a god/temple and are supposed to satisfy, sexually, any man who comes to them since god resides in every man.

[30]'The Manipur Devadasis (maibis) are selected from the selected few who had a tragic call of fate and unusual signs'. M. Kirti, 'Meiteism through the Ages', in Sanajaoba Naorem (ed.), *Manipur Past and Present, vol 2,* Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 1991, p. 101.

[31]They have been, sadly and incorrectly, described as mere sexual objects by scholars of their own society. See also the story of Khamba-Thoibi mentioned after some paragraphs.

In other words, she specializes in the function of a mid-wife. They deliver the child, cut its umbilical cord with a bamboo-knife, and while cutting it, request the *limi* (shadow) or the soul, which is associated with the body at the time of birth and is part of the baby's personality, to take its place in the child. The maibis believe that this shadow is the essence or the conscience of the newborn life. When life goes away, the *mi* (shadow) follows.

This maibi also performs a ritual which is a kind of game to test the new mother's love for the new-born child. She keeps bargaining for the child in exchange for various objects until she is convinced that the mother truly loves her child.

(b)	*Khabi shingta*	*chakpa larak*	*phambi*
	(one who can stop the god)	(banana leaf)	(who sits)

It literally means one who sits on the banana leaf in the Lai-haraoba of Chakpas[32] and stops/confronts the *lai*.

These are the Maibis who participate in the Lai-haraoba dressed in a white skirt with red stripes. They are the ones who get possessed. At the beginning of *lairon* (language of god) they sit on a banana leaf which is considered sacred and conforming to good etiquette in order to reach the gods. It is also believed that the growth of banana trees is an indication of a fertile ground, since where even a banana tree can not grow no other vegetation is possible. The banana leaf, like all other things, is a symbol of fertility, hence prosperity. They cover their head and face with a white cloth, hold a bell in one hand and ring it near their body. According to them, this helps in concentration and prevents distraction.

In a very famous lore about the two divine lovers of Moirang, Khamba and Thoibi, Khamba is a poor orphan with royal ancestry. He is oblivious of this fact. Thoibi is the adopted daughter of a Moirang king.[33] They are madly in love with each other. Nongban, a noble who is the villain of the story, wants to marry Thoibi and is jealous of Khamba. In one of his evil games he dresses himself as a maibi and with a bell in his hand starts uttering oracles:

[32]Believed to be original settlers of this valley from where the performance of Lai-haraoba originated. The name of these kinds of maibis, therefore, also has its origin from there.

[33]The Moirang king had no issue and he treated his brother's daughter, Thoibi, as his own daughter.

Listen my children, I am god Thangjing (Moirang deity) speaking to you. These days I have no peace of mind and evil omens are appearing one after another before my kingdom....There is a wild bull reigning as the king of wild beasts....Capture it alive and offer it to me. If you can do it, the land will prosper and evil omens will have no effect.[34]

This oracle was uttered with the intention of luring Khamba to volunteer himself before the bull and thus get killed. What is important for us here is that Nongban was convinced that passing oracles by impersonating as a maibi was the best way to convince the people, since they would not dare distrust a maibi. Even the king, after listening to the words of the maibi (Nongban), was obliged to believe it and had to pass orders to award the brave man who would bring the wild bull alive.

The words of the possessed maibi were believed to be the words of god and were obeyed with greatest reverence and sincerity. But now people's faith in maibis is slowly fading. The result is that quite often, to many, these trances look like a farce and as mere formalities.

There was one woman who possesses certain attributes of a maibi, who felt very upset if addressed as maibi, or even *Ima-maibi* (head maibi). She wanted us to call her only *Ima* (mother).[35] She had been addressed as Khongman Ima in previous chapters.

This particular Ima used to go into a trance and had communion with god, and delivered oracles, foreold the future of individuals, and gave religious treatment to the sick, just like any other maibi. But what made her and her establishment different from maibis was, that she never went to any 'Ima-maibi' for *Laikhai-taba* (training). She did not perform *maibi jagoi* (dance style which they learn during training). When she went into a trance she did not cover her head with a white sheet and nor did she ring the bell. While in a trance, her body did not jerk; instead, she just closed her eyes, and slowly and softly, after invoking the deity, started conversing with him or her as a long time friend. She did not go to individual houses to tell peoples' future, but held her 'durbar' within her large compound on Wednesdays and Sundays, where people from far off places came from six in the morning till evening. According to her, the god had told her that he/she will come to her on these two days. Instead of

[34]N.T. Singh, *Khamba and Thoibi: The Unscaled heights of love,* Imphal, 1977.

[35]The Manipuri word for 'mother.'

a white dress which is worn by maibis, she dressed herself to create an image of that particular deity. She dressed differently as and when any god decided to manifest itself through her.[36] According to her husband (who is a maiba) she wears the Tangkhul dress when assuming the Nongpok Ningthou form.

We know that every tribe/community has its own form of worship and hence different forms of manifestations of the images of the gods and goddesses. Therefore, for every tribe the deities will be draped in different cloth, ornament etc. We can not say that all the manifestations are the same. The gods/goddesses governing the different tribes/communities will appear in different forms corresponding to the needs/requirements and/or concepts of that particular community.

There are 108 gods and goddesses in this land as mentioned in the text, *Leimaren Langlol*.[37] But, this does not mean that this Ima changes into 108 dresses. She makes only slight modifications in her dress—the style, ornaments, colour, etc., to indicate a symbolic representation of that particular manifestation.

Her phenomenon was referred to as a 'mother cult'. This 'mother cult', according to the Khongman people, although strictly a part of traditional Meitei religion, was an autonomous phenomenon. The concept of Kangla was linked with this establishment, and it had its own status in the village. The place where she held her 'durbar' had images of Sanamahi, paaphans (coiled snake structures) of Pakhangba, the boats which are believed to be the vehicle of Pakhangba, when the whole valley was submerged in water. The deity that is worshipped there is Nongpok Ningthou, a very important deity of this land.

The mother of this establishment was an ordinary woman, when not in a state of trance. She has five children and a devoted husband, and also a daughter-in-law. But, in a state of trance, she becomes that medium, that link, between human beings and past energies, gods and ancestors.

What she said about herself added to the already mysterious aura surrounding her:

[36]On the day when I visited her she was wearing a Tangkhul Naga dress and I was told that she was possessed by Nongpok Ningthou—the direction deity residing in the East—the land of Tangkhuls.

[37]Ancient text on the various Meitei gods.

I am not literate. I did not go to school. I have not been taught anything by anybody. It is god who tells me all I know today. When I am possessed by god you can ask any question for which an answer will always be given. However, I do not remember anything I say during that time, for at that time I become oblivious of my own existence.

I am not like any of these other maibis. If you address me as a maibi my whole day will be rendered useless as I will not be able to perform any kind of work. I am merely the messenger of the voice of god. At night when I go to sleep nobody can wake me up as my *thawai* (soul) goes out of my body and merges with any one of the *lais* (gods) and roams around the universe. Only after my soul re-enters my body I can wake up. Sometimes, I get tired of this onerous responsibility but I am quite happy and privileged to be chosen by god to act as his messenger.

This mother cult, however, is not a common phenomenon. Hinduism, having been declared a state religion by the king, had to be enforced on the people. Autonomous cults like these with a large following were a clear hindrance to the smooth Hinduizing process.

Unlike maibis, who can be either male or female; maiba is a profession totally assigned to males. They are the traditional physicians who cure people of their physical, as well as psychological/spiritual illnesses according to a maiba who was interviewed:

Respondent: With medicines we may remove the cause of illness temporarily, but the spirit inside the body is still there. That spirit is removed only if we reach deep into the soul energy, and this is done by concentrated prayer. Thus both medicines and these prayers, are essential in curing a person fully. So a maiba, along with curing the physical aspect of illness through herbs, is also proficient in ritual prayers to address the spirit.

Question: And for every kind of disease/ailment, is there a different kind of ritual and prayer?

Respondent: Yes, there is. We do not say these things on our own; it is all written down in *Maiba-Lairol.*[38]

Question: It is said that maibis are not trained, that they are born as maibis, what about maibas?

Respondent: Of course, maibas are trained, they learn from elders. But simple learning alone can not do. One has to have an individualistic tendency, thinking capacity,

[38]An ancient text for the maibas to understand the philosophy of treatments.

perceptibility, etc., and more importantly, one must have the capability to think more deeply than others. There are some trained maibas who can absorb only the things taught to them. But, there are some who can absorb more than just the things taught to them. It all depends on one's intuitive capabilities.

Before getting trained as a maiba, this man was a mason. Later on he learnt the *maiba-lon* (language of maibas) from elders. He continued his study of maiba-lon as an apprentice to the elders, who were already practicing as professionals. After studying the science of reading pulses, he went with them to houses where treatment was to be given. He used to participate actively in rituals and treatments. Maiba-lon is a physician's text. It mainly deals with pulse-reading, and it is mainly through pulse reading that the whole physiology of the patient is understood.

Respondent: Then there is the question of heredity, *Mapa-mapu gi keirak* (ancestor's ladder), which is important in diagnosing the illness of a patient. There is the concept of the flow of life from a high level to a lower one. The flow of the stream of life differs according to the way our life-system flows down from our ancestors.

What the maibas are mostly concerned with is the philosophy of birth and death, how it occurs, and so forth. There is no book according to them which can tell these secrets of life. Hence, it is all based on one's mental capabilities and learning from elders. Understanding the rhythms and the characteristics of birth and death of the human body is the crux of their learning and treatment.

Today, the importance of maibas and maibis has lessened, because of an awareness of modern science and rationality, but, still in many cases no ceremony of birth is complete without the maibi cutting the umbilical chord and infusing the *mi* (shadow), or the sixth soul, into the child, and no death is declared in any house, before a maiba comes, who after performing certain rituals and touching the pulse of the deceased, officially confirms it.

AUSPICIOUS/INAUSPICIOUS

According to one anecdote, once a king had to travel to the east, but the day he wanted to start his journey was not auspicious for travelling in that direction, so the king moved to a room which was situated

on the eastern side of the palace a day earlier and started his journey the next day. It was believed that since the king had started his journey the previous day, which was not inauspicious for moving in that direction he could 'safely' 'continue' his eastward journey on the appointed day.

Manipuris are extremely careful about days and dates for setting out on journeys in different directions, although in emergencies, as stated above, such kinds of solutions were also possible.[39] The following are the Meitei names for different days and the corresponding directions in which it is inauspicious to travel.

Meitei week days	Corresponding English days	Inauspicious directions
Ningthoukaba	Monday	East
Laipakpokpa	Tuesday	North and East
Yumshakeisa	Wednesday	North and East
Sagolsen	Thursday	South and East
Irai	Friday	West
Thangja	Saturday	North and East
Nongmaijing	Sunday	West and South

Not only days, even certain dates of the Meitei's lunar months are considered unlucky to travel in certain directions:

To the North ... 2nd and 10th
To the South ... 3rd, 4th, 5th, 11th and 13th
To the East ... 1st and 9th
To the North-east ... 8th, 15th, 30th
To the North-west ... 7th, 15th
To the South-west ... 4th, 12th

[39]In the course of my fieldwork and stay there, I was constantly told by the senior members of the society, whether to go or not to go in a particular direction on a particular day, and whether going in a particular direction will benefit me. If I went in a certain direction disregarding their suggestion, and, if by chance, things did not work out the way we had planned, I was immediately reminded of the warning given to me by them.

When Shantidas, who converted Garibniwaz into a Hindu suggested that a new structure be built, after pulling down the Kangla, it was believed that blood sprouted from all the pillars that had been pulled down. This was taken as a very bad omen and was sought to indicate disaster for the state. Immediately, a proper worship of Pakhangba was performed. The pillars were installed and the structure was repaired.

There is a huge peepul tree in Bishnupur which is said to have been planted by Khongnangthaba.[40] It is believed that when the branches of this tree touch the ground it will be a bad omen and an indication of some serious calamity that could befall the state. Once, when these branches did touch the ground, the World War II engulfed Manipur. And yet, if anybody was to cut the branches to prevent them from touching the ground, ill consequences were thought to follow.

After a marriage, when the bride and the bridegroom reach the bridegroom's place, two fish are floated in the *pukhri* (pond). If the fish swim together, the couple would have a happy married life and if they went astray, a word of caution used to be spread around.

Before the commencement of the construction of a house, an auspicious date and day is decided for the first pillar to be erected. Silver and gold pieces are placed in the foundation of the pillar, along with various other offerings, such as milk, sugar-cane and ghee. While gold and silver indicate the supreme *Pa* (father) and *Pi* (mother), respectively, the other offerings are an indication of prosperity.

There are four main parts in a traditional Meitei house;

(a) *Shang-gai ka* (the main living room) which should face south ward.

(b) *Mayai ka* (middle room) which should face the east,

(c) *Lukhuum ka* (situated in the southern side of Shang-gai ka) which should also face east, and,

(d) *Ningol ka* (room for daughters) which should also face east.

The dwelling place for human beings (*Yumjao*) should not face south and north. If houses are built facing these prohibited directions, misfortune would befall those inhabiting the house.

[40]The most vocal traditional priest who spoke against the imposition of Hinduism as the state religion. He has been discussed in the earlier chapter.

Many mishaps in the lives of various kings were believed to have been foretold by the maibis with the help of the appearance of some omens.

Maharaj Debendro Singh had a very short reign of three months (1850) and this was foretold by the death of the king's elephant and the presence of many frogs jumping around Kangla.

A fire is to be kept burning in the house for the prosperity of its inhabitants. It is called *Phunga Apokpa.* Worshipping the phunga apokpa granted sons wealth, and long life. Offerings for this deity were raw and only the offerer was to eat the offerings, the rest was to be buried, since a blessing to one (the offerer) could have evil effects on the person who did not offer. There are some specific months for fulfilling special wishes. *Inga* month (June–July) is auspicious for prayers for wealth. *Poinu* (December–January) is good for wishing long life, and *Langban* (August–September) is good for begetting a son.

Every action, every step, and every stage of a Meitei's life is governed by what is auspicious and what is inauspicious. The ideology of 'pure' and 'impure' was absent from Meitei beliefs and practices. It was only after the ideology of Hinduism struck root in the Meitei mind, that considering somebody or something 'impure' in relation to themselves became an additional element in their ideology. Auspicious and inauspicious were only judged, by bad omens, through the signs appearing in nature.[41] 'Pure', 'impure' started the trend of judging another being by his/her regional and religious doctrines, although within the Meitei salai structure this dichotomy did not take root.

The Deities

Pundit Achouba narrated to me an incident in which an engineer of the Loktak Lake hydro electricity power project[42] and some other prominent persons entered into the tunnel at the project site in 1989. He told me that they all died. Then a puja was performed and the dragon residing in that lake was requested to come out. People saw the dragon which had open jaws and broad eyes. The priest of *Pundit*

[41]The appearance of frogs, the flight of particular birds, or the death of certain animals, etc.

[42]A natural lake in Moirang district held sacred by the Meiteis.

Loishang performed the puja to appease Pakhangba. The dragon was Pakhangba, who was recognized by the horns alongside his ears, with cobwebs and dried leaves stuck on the horns. In Kangla it appeared as a deer. On some occasions Pundit Achouba (the chief priest) had seen Pakhangba in the form of a human being, for instance, in Kabuli Khul.[43] It could appear in any form, it was recognizable by its distinctive features. It had a golden colour, howsoever small it was. It glistened in the sun, It appeared in different sizes, sometimes as small as a coin, and at other times as big as a boat. The size was usually bigger in the *laiphams*[44] of every locality.

Everything pertaining to the religious realm was preceded by the word *Lai, Laishang* (temple of god), *Laipham* (place of gods), *Laining Lambi* (way of worship), *Laipao* (message of god) etc.

The Manipuri word for god is *Lai*. The number of gods/goddesses in the Meitei pantheon is one hundred and eight in addition to Atiya Sidaba (Sky God), Sanamahi (a household deity),[45] and Pakhangba (the Mangang ancestor, who later became the originator of all the seven salais)[46]

All these deities can be broadly divided into three groups:

a) *The directional deities* and the gods presiding over the diverse aspects of nature.
b) *The household deities*.
c) *Ancestors* of each salai.

(a) Directional Deities

Wangbaren or *Wangpurel*, is a deity residing in water. He is the guardian of the southern part of the Manipur state. He is depicted as a deity riding a black tiger. He is anger and terror personified. He drowns people, and creates floods. He should be kept in good humor and worshiped with all devotion. Gold necklaces, and sexual indulgence is strictly forbidden during his worship. His main temple is at Sugnu[47] on the bank of Imphal river.

[43]A village situated near the palace ground area inhabited by the Kaberi Naga tribes.

[44]An area believed to be the abode of Pakhangba.

[45]He was renamed *Surya devta* or Sun-god by the Hindus.

[46]Renamed as moon-god by the Hindu pundits who wanted to draw a parallel between their religion and Meitei beliefs, to enable easy conversion by making this religion part and parcel of the same doctrine.

Koubru is the directional deity of the North-West. The hill named after him is believed to be the place of origin of the Meiteis. The deity was worshipped annually by the king with the sacrifice of goats, sheep, etc., in order to avoid famine. His temples are located in the Loi villages of Sekmai and Phayeng.

The most prominent and dominant god among the Meitei pantheon is Nangpok Ningthou. He is the guardian of the eastern direction, and over the years has become the central deity of the Lai-haraoba festival.

I asked one priest the meaning of the word *Nongpok*. According to him, it has many interpretations. The term '*Nongpok*' is an ambiguous one. In ordinary terms, it means the eastern direction. On a higher plane, it implies the 'soul', the origin of the initial life source energies of every man. By 'soul' they imply the 'source'. Source of rains, clouds, winds, etc. All these phenomena originate from him, he gives them their meaning; this source energy is called *Nongpok*. The third interpretation was given by deriving the literal meaning of the word *Nongpok*. '*Nong*' means day and 'pok/pokpa' means 'birth'. Thus it is the eastern direction from which day breaks. He is shown in the Tangkhul tribe's dress and the dance performed in his name in Lai-haraoba is also called the Tangkhul dance. It is perhaps because the area of the Tangkhul Nagas is in the direction assigned to him (east).

Thangjing is the protector of the South-West direction. Khamba-Thoibi, the main characters of the love story mentioned earlier, which forms the basis of the Moirang *parva* (episode), an integral part of Manipuri culture as a whole, are considered his creation. A temple is dedicated to him in Moirang.

Marjing is the protector of the North-Eastern direction and also the protector of animals. The Manipuri versions of polo and hockey are traced to him. People invoke and worship him with a polo stick and a ball when any animal in their house becomes sick.[48]

(b) Household Deities

Phunga Apokpa, is worshipped in every house. An iron tripod called *Yotsabi* is placed on the fire (*phunga*). This fire is to be kept burning day and night with husk, wood and other materials. Every Meitei

[47] About forty miles south of Imphal.
[48] Manipuri polo is considered the origin for the present form of polo.

first offers to this deity and then eats his food. When a new house is built, a fire should be kept burning for five days before entering the house for living.

According to the legends, Poireiton (the ancestor of the Luwang salai) introduced the use of fire. This fire is believed to be still burning in the village of Andro, and the chief of the village is responsible for its continuity. People in that village still take fire from there to light fire in their homes; people living at far-off places also take this fire for invoking the gods they desire.

Sanamahi, is the most important deity in every Meitei house. Everyone, before undertaking any major task, takes the blessings of Sanamahi.

According to the priests of Meitei faith, Sanamahi, who was assigned to create the world, created it through the parts of his body. The upper portion of his abdomen is heaven, his back is earth, his bones are iron, intestines are the great rivers, his muscles have become the great mountains, and his eyes are the sun and the moon.

Although he is worshipped every day, his main worship is done on the last day of the Meitei *chak* (year), which corresponds to the middle of March in the Gregorian calendar.

Some Kabui tribes also worship him, although unlike the Meiteis, they offer the sacrifice of fowls, pigs, and *yu* (rice beer), etc.

(c) Ancestral Deities

I begin this discussion with the mothers of these deities.

Among the goddesses, besides Leimaren (Mother Earth), Panthoibi has the most important position. Although Hindus have made her 'Durga/Parvati' and the goddess of love and pleasure, she has much greater attributes assigned to her besides these. According to one priest, in the book *Moirang Panthoi Eram*, there is a story 'Panthoibigi Sumang Taoroinai Yangbi' in which it is stated that the light which is emitted from the *Korou* (heaven) to the *Mulem-tampak* (earth) is the goddess Panthoibi herself. The 'drama of life' played in this mortal world is also the game of this goddess. She has no father, no mother. 'The energy which drives us on is goddess Panthoibi.'

According to a myth, when Creation was taking place, Haraba Lai, an evil spirit tried to destroy the universe. At this time 'Kongru Sidaba' (probably another name of Atiya Sidaba) produced Nongthang Lairembi (lightening goddess) from the navel of Taibang

Mapu (another name of Atingkok, The Supreme Creator). Nongthang Lairembi kept Haraba Lai away by distracting his attention by her dances; thus, the creation of the universe was completed.

After the completion of Creation, Nongthang Lairembi took two forms, one as *Panthoibi*, who lived in the abode of the gods and, another, as *Apanthoibi,* who lived among the beings.

Panthoibi can never be represented in any form. It does not have any particular form. It represents all virtues and beauty.

Apanthoibi is manifested in different forms in the universe. It is expressed through all the animate and inanimate objects. Apanthoibi is also considered the supreme creator of the seven salais. This is probably the reason why the genealogies of all the seven salais begin with the mother figure.

The Ningthouja salai is born from the womb of Yabirok, Chenglei salais from Huimuleima, the Moirang salais from Leinung Yuchak-hachanu Ngangshabi, Khuman salai and Luwang salai from Piyainu, Khaba salai from Langmaithingthou Chanu, and Angom salai from Khakpa Ningthou Chanu. All these six mothers are the manifestation of this goddess called Apanthoibi.

The ancestors of these seven salais are thus the sons of these six manifestations of Apanthoibi.

Ancestor worship forms the basis of all worship in Meitei society. The ancestors of the salais are called Apokpa. The mode of worship of these ancestors has already been mentioned in a chart in the previous chapter. Apart from this, every Sagei[49] also has its own ancestors or deities, who are worshiped according to prescribed norms. Thus, for example, Laishram sagei will worship Laishram Lairembi as its sagei deity, Sanamahi as its household deity and Khuman Apokpa as its salai deity. Besides these major ancestral deities there are also some immediate ancestral spirits called *Kasai*. These spirits are worshipped on the occasion of *Ipanthaba* (on the sixth day of the delivery of a child) and also on *Cha-woomba* (rice giving ceremony) to the three month old baby.

The Body, the State, and the Cosmos

The 'world' in Meitei belief covers the vertical as well as horizontal space. Heaven is as much the part of the Creation as earth is and so are the other animate and inanimate things.

[49]Extended lineage structure.

A human being is called '*Mee*', since it has been created in the pattern of *mi* (the shadow image), and the human body is a place of divine habitation.

Every time a child is born into this world, it is believed that Atiya Sidaba pierces into its body through the *Linju* (the top most, soft part of the head called the cortex) and takes in the five deities along with his breath. They are placed in the five parts of the body: Koubru settles in the cortex, Marjing in the heart, Amamba in the navel, Thangjing below the navel and Wangpurel in the genital organs. In this way all the deities of different directions in the physical world, protect the human being by placing themselves in all the vital parts of his body. The sixth soul, called *mi* (shadow), is part of the personality and is associated with the body at the time of birth. When the mid-wife (maibi) cuts the umbilical cord with a bamboo knife, she invokes all the six souls to take their place in the child.

Hence the image of the whole cosmos outside has a direct replica of it inside every human body. Every human thus represents a complete creation. And each creation of the outside world also shares a relationship of homology to a corresponding part of the human body. The creation of the state is also based on a similar principle which is best exemplified in the coronation ceremony where the king, symbolically, crosses the umbilical cord to reach his throne and is 'born' as a king to serve his country. Kangla (the capital) is perceived as the source of primal energies. The rivers emanating from it are considered the veins of the state structure.

The body, the state, and the cosmos are all interpreted through a common principle, and that is the fertility principle. All the three concepts are conceived by the basic *Pa* (male) and *Pi* (female) principles. The act of copulation is then not a hidden and private affair, instead it is jointly rejoiced as a symbol of creation, as well as of the prosperity of the whole 'universe', including gods, ancestors, state, and mundane human beings.

5

The Rites and the Rituals

This was the area where Hinduism, or more precisely Vaishnav Hinduism, had the greatest influence. It succeeded in diluting, and sometimes, even disintegrating, the rites and rituals pertaining to the traditional Meitei faith. A few new Hindu rites and rituals were also adopted and incorporated. Yet, in the event of bringing a child to this world, and sending the soul of the being back to heaven, the required rituals were and still are conducted by the maibas and the maibis. All the other intermediate rites-of-passage were influenced by Hinduism, which nevertheless retained some of the traditional cultural characteristics. With new elements incorporated and old elements modified, the rites and rituals pertaining to this society evolved as 'Meitei Hindu rituals', rather than just as Hindu rituals. We shall see how the Meitei brand of Hinduism is distinctly different from the rites and rituals of the Hindus in the rest of India.

Societal norms, prior to the advent of Hinduism were not conducive to the formation of a full-fledged Hindu state. The caste system, the concept of purity-impurity, untouchability, hierarchy, ascribed division of labour, etc., which form important bases for the establishment of the tenets of Hinduism, were (and to some extent still are) absent in the Meitei social structure. Hinduism had to be initially imposed on the Meitei people by making it a state religion. But it could only put a blanket of Hindu festivals and rituals over the Meitei beliefs, rites, and rituals, beneath which the system of the traditional faith retained its roots. Scholars, pundits, and intelligentsia of that time, and even of present times, tried and are still trying to draw a parallel between Hindu and Meitei gods and rituals, to the extent that they attempted to derive an evolutionary line from Indra[1]

[1] The Lord of Heaven in the Hindu pantheon.

such that, for some Atiya Sidaba[2] became just another name for Indra. The names of the salais became Brahmin gotras and Vishnu became the ancestor of all royal descendants, replacing Pakhangba. Nongpok Ningthou became Shiva and Panthoibi (the divine light) became Parvati and Durga simultaneously.

The practice of burning fire (*Phunga-Apokpa*) inside the house was traced to Vedic antiquity.

As already mentioned, all these newly introduced festivals and rituals, could only be formal signs of Hinduism and could never interfere entirely with the Meitei belief in their own ancestors. This is not to say that the Meiteis did not get influenced by Hinduism. Some scholars and some sections of the people, who were deeply persuaded by the doctrine of Vaishnavism became staunch Hindus and were devout devotees of Krishna. In talking to them I realized that the idea which influenced them most strongly was their notion of Vaishnav Hinduism as a 'higher' and 'civilized' religious doctrine through which they could become part of the 'high' Sanskritic tradition of pan-Hindu India. They were also convinced that Lai-haraoba, Pakhangba, the directional deities etc., formed the 'lower' strata in religious philosophies, since they belonged to an 'animistic' form of worship as the category of ancestor cult, which was way down in the evolutionary theory of religions of the world and hence linked to primitive stages of societal development.

These people formulated another theory to justify the constituent elements of Meitei beliefs and practices, by describing them as '*tantrik*'[3] practices, including them in the fold of Hinduism, although much lower in the hierarchy, as part of the pan-Hindu ideology.

Except for the areas of Phayeng, Andro, Sekmai etc., Meiteis in other areas got converted to Vaishnavism during the reign of Garibniwaz, though there are a few households in the outskirts of Imphal which have been practicing Meitei religion since time immemorial.

According to a woman in Khongman, no one in the interior was spared from forcible conversion to Hinduism. It was only about fifty years ago that revivalism was allowed to emerge in the interiors.

During the reign of Churachand[4] Maharaj all those who tried to follow the old religion openly were persecuted; many were jailed.

[2] The sky god in Meitei belief.

[3] 'Tantra' is one one of the later Hindu scriptures marked by mysticized magic and witchcraft. The followers of this cult usually worship goddess Kali.

[4] The first king installed by the British under their rule.

Those Hindu Meiteis who invited any one adhering to the old religion used to be ostracized by society. It was only during the reign of Bodhachandra Maharaj that the Meiteis were able to practice their old religion unhindered. The woman in Khongman explained this liberal outlook by saying that Bodhachandra had the 'real' royal blood of Pakhangba.

Though Meitei religion was observed during the reign of Garibniwaz, Bhagyachandra, and Churachand, it was never observed publicly. Every household had special places for the Laiingthou, Leimaren and the Phunga Apokpa, even though Garibniwaz had announced the threat of death if such places were maintained in the households.

During those times, I was told by some old people that the Meiteis used to worship these deities secretly at night in order to avoid persecution by the king. The left-over of the offering to the 'Apokpa'[5] was buried inside the residential area so that neighbours could not witness it or inform the king, who was sure to punish such persons.

The original form of the Meitei rites of passage is best visualized in the rituals of Lai-haraoba.[6] The maibi evokes the spirit or calls out to the sexual energies of the supreme father and mother from the water, who then copulate and give birth to a baby, who is ceremoniously and ritually brought into the world. When the baby grew up with all ritual initiations, his house was constructed and marriage too was ceremonized following all ritual details. Death was not associated with *Lais*, hence his soul was ceremoniously sent back from where it came, that is, to water.

The House Structure

Yumjao (residential house) for the Meiteis is the abode of the *Lais* (gods). Hence every stage of house construction is marked by prescribed rituals, auspicious days and dates, and prescribed directions for the whole structure and the rooms. The house structure faces east, and it is believed that if the house faces south or north, some calamity will befall its inhabitants.

[5] Means ancestor.

[6] The present rites of the life cycle as practised have many elements of Hinduism.

A rectangular shaped foundation is laid on the auspicious day when the first pillar, *Jatra*, is erected. The ceremony to lay the foundation is called *Jatra Hunba.* Then all the pillars (*Ambo*) are erected and it is only after this that the construction starts.

The whole house is divided into six parts:

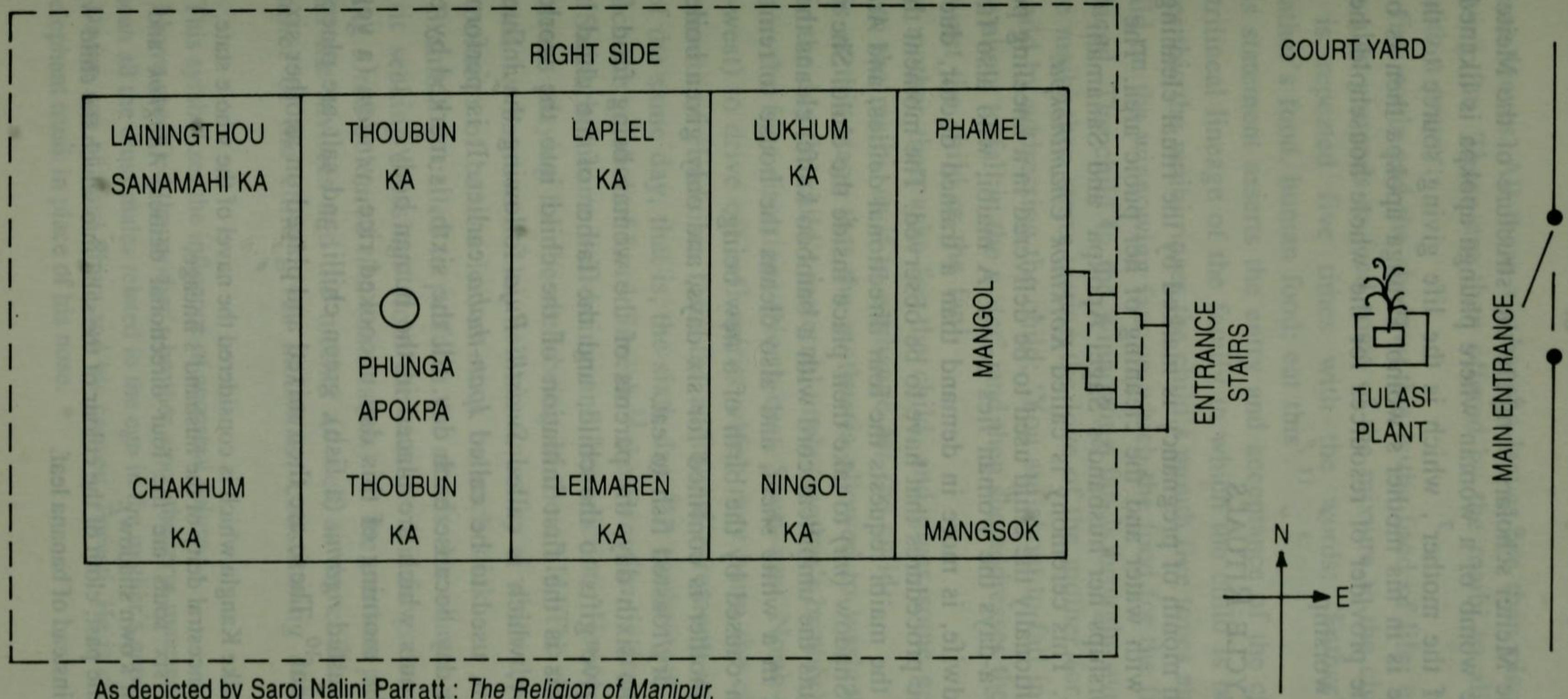
Maangol is the verandah, facing the eastern direction on the side where the *Jatra*, is erected. This verandah is divided into two parts. The right side is called *Phamel*, where a seat is placed for the head of the family. He receives visitors here. On the left side is *Mangsok,* from where the dead body is taken out.

The left side of the house is the place for women. Behind the Mangsok, which is on the left side, is the daughter's room, *Ningolka.* Behind that is the room for Leimaren or Yumjao Lairembi, the household goddess. Then comes the room for young children, *Thoubunka* and finally the kitchen, *Chakhumka*, which is of course the domain of the women. The left side is related to women, to the extent that when a female child is born, the umbilical cord is buried on the left side of the house, and on the right side in the case of a male child. For sleeping, the wife is supposed to sleep only on the left side adjacent to the wall, reserving the right side, which is also the outer side, for her husband. The fact that the door for the dead is also from the left side, gives this side a lower position compared to the right side, which is associated with life and also the side for the male sex.

Behind Phamel, the right side of the verandah, is *Laplelka*, the room for the head of the family. The father and the mother, who are also the source of generative power of the whole household, live in this room; behind this is the room for the eldest son, and in front of this, the room for the younger males. Behind the eldest son's room is the *Laiyum* (house of god) where Lainingthou Sanamahi is worshipped. This room is adjacent to Chakhumka, the kitchen.

In the centre of the house is the place for *Phunga Apokpa* (the fire deity), the continuous burning of which brings prosperity, long life, and sons. This fire is lighted five days before the family enters the newly constructed house, since it is also believed to ward off evil spirits.

In front of the house is the plant of *tulasi* (holy basil) which is worshipped by Hindu Meitei women every morning and evening. Meiteis who believe in the traditional Meitei faith do not plant the tulasi.



As depicted by Saroj Nalini Parratt : *The Religion of Manipur.*

Cross section of a *Yumjao* (Meitei house)

Some Meitei scholars compare the structure of the Meitei house with the womb of a woman where phunga apokpa is likened to the navel of the mother[7], which is the life giving source to the child when he is in his mother's womb. Phunga apokpa then is believed to be the provider of resources for the whole household, hence its regular worship.

Life Cycle Rituals

The fifth month of pregnancy is marked by the ritual cleaning of the woman with water and the cleaning of her pubic area. The woman then worships her husband's Sagei Apokpa[8] and Sanamahi for safe delivery. This ceremony is called *Korkthok Chamthokpa.*

Traditionally the child used to be delivered in a kneeling position, but now-a-days the woman lies down. A maibi, who also functions as a midwife, is more in demand than a trained doctor, due to the ritualistic procedures that have to be observed. The moment the child is born, the maibi requests the four directional deities, and *Atingkok*, and the Shadow (*mi*) to take their place inside the child. She ritualistically cuts the umbilical cord with a bamboo knife, cleans the child, wraps it in a white sheet, and also cleans the house to remove the pollution caused by the birth of a new being.

The mother is confined for six days, and only given boiled rice, salt and dry/roasted fish to eat.

On the sixth day, the parents of the woman bring food for her, people give gifts to the child, and the father of the child holds a feast. This is the first initiation of the child into the world. This ceremony, which is called *Swasthi Puja* following the influence of Hinduism, used to be called *Ipan-thaba* earlier. It is performed on the sixth day because each day, till the sixth, is marked by each of the six souls which are placed in the human body.[9]

On the morning of this day uncooked rice, *yendem* (a vegetable plant), roasted *ngamu* (a fish), green chilli, and salt are placed on a banana leaf[10]. These are then mixed and placed on another six pieces

[7] Just like Kangla which is considered the navel of the whole state.

[8] The ancestral deity of the husband's lineage.

[9] The six souls are the four directional deities, *Atingkok* and the *mi* (individual's own shadow).

[10] In the past, cloth of the colour of the salai into which the child was born was used instead of banana leaf.

of banana leaves. All these six banana leaves are then placed on a winnowing fan. These are then offered by the maibi to all the six souls with a prayer;

'O, five souls and the shadow, this is the food of life; eat this.'

She also pretends to feed some of the mixture to the child. This action is repeated five times with the words; 'Father's food, grandfather's food, human food; eat this'.[11]

This statement asserts the entry and acceptance of the child into the patrilineal lineage of the family in which the child is born.

After this the maibi rinses the child's mouth five times and places the child on the winnowing fan, on which the food for the five souls was placed. The child in the winnowing fan is brought over a fire, and the maibi then starts testing the love of the mother for the new born child by addressing the child; 'You are about to fall in the fire, you are about to fall in the water', and then she addresses the mother; 'You want the child or the fan'.

The mother then asks for the child, and gives some gold ornaments to the maibi, as if in exchange for the child.

It is at this stage that the mother is allowed to wash the child. Later in the day the child's maternal uncle (mother's brother)[12] shoots arrows in the four directions (North-east, South-east, North-west and South-west) to drive off evil spirits which may harm the child.

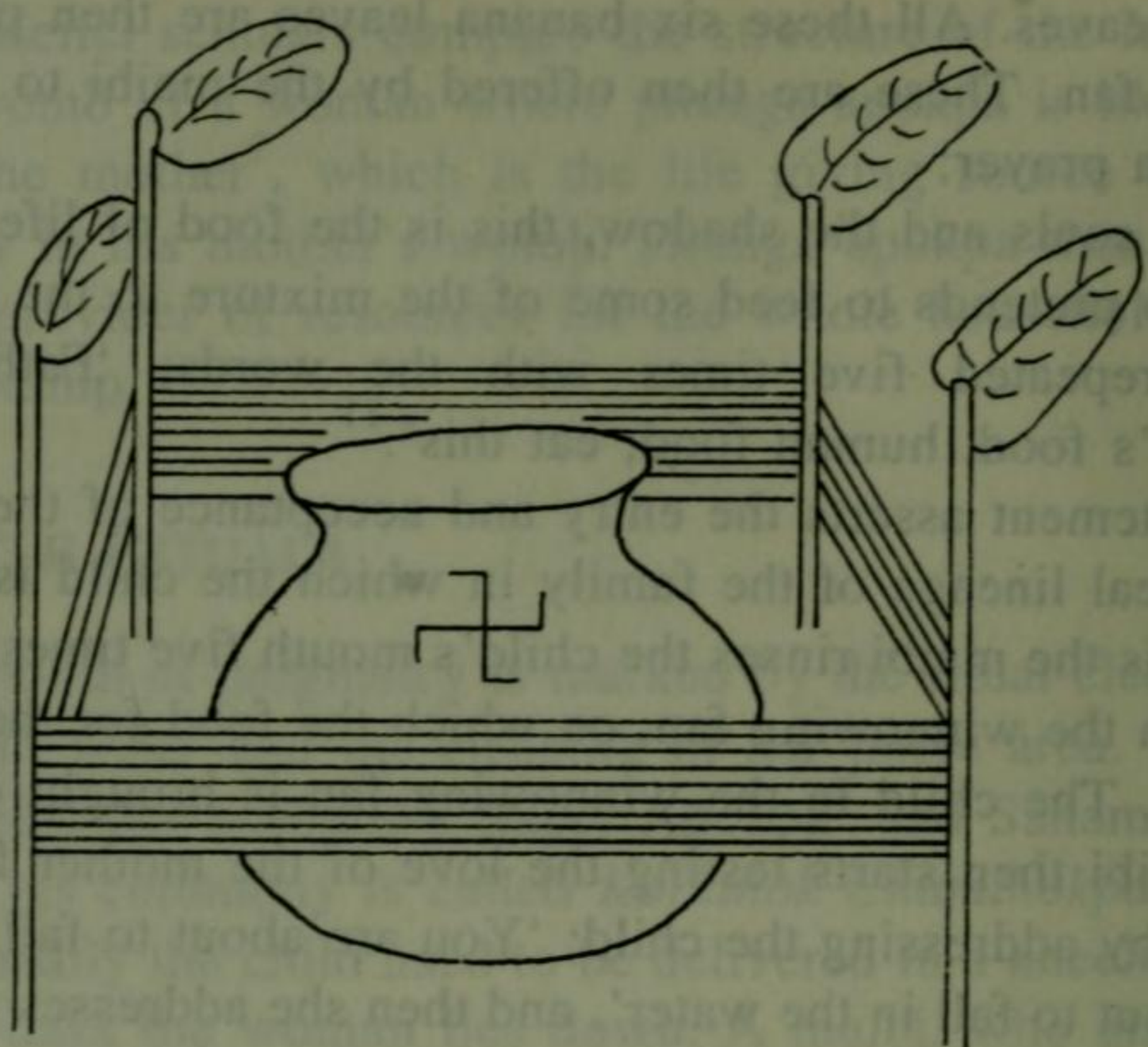
Elements of Hinduism form the additional ceremony in the evening of the same day, that is, the sixth day. An earthen pot is placed on which the symbol of Lord Ganesh,[13] the *Swastika*, is drawn. *Swasthi* in Sanskrit means well-being and benediction. Hence, Swasthi Puja means praying for the well-being of the child. The earthen pot is framed by bamboo sticks, tied six times by a white thread, with small portions of banana leaves stuck on each stick.

A Brahmin is called to perform the rituals. He chants prayers in Sanskrit seeking blessings from the various Hindu gods, and after applying a red coloured *tika* (annotation) on the earthen pot, applies it to all the invitees and the mother as well as the child. After this the father of the child gives *dakshina*, constituting some coins,

[11] This symbolizes the influence of ancestral values.

[12] I have specified the mother's brother since the term maternal uncle can also mean all the cross males related to the ego in the mother's generation.

[13] Divine son of Lord Shiva and his consort, Parvati. He is characterized by an elephant trunk in place of his nose.



The Swasthi Pot

according to his economic status, to all the people, and some clothes and coins to the Brahmin priest.

On the twelfth day, again the Brahmin comes and purifies the house by sprinkling water with a bunch of tulasi leaves. It is only after this, that the mother and the child are completely purified. The defilement caused by the delivery of the child to some extent affects the whole sagei, which cleanses itself by ceremonial washing, and the maibi who has brought the child into the world also bathes.

When the child reaches the age of around two or three years, the *Chomlan Yanba*[14] ceremony is performed, which was recently given a Hindu term, *Karnabhed*.[15] Initially, during this ceremony, the fire of the salai involved was lit, ancestors and fore-fathers were invoked, and blessings were sought for the child. After conversion to Hinduism this ceremony went through a number of modifications according to which the head of the child was shaved, and he/she was made to stand under a cotton cloth held by four persons. Water was poured from above the cloth, which filtered down on the child, as a mark of ritual bathing. His/her ears were pierced and a gold ear ring was inserted. These earrings, symbolized the stage in which the child was and was not supposed to be taken out, till before his/her marriage.

[14] Wearing the earrings.
[15] Piercing the ear.

The marriage system among the Meitei Hindus is not similar to the marriage system of the Hindus in other parts of India. A Meitei Hindu marriage is conducted in the courtyard, around the tulasi plant, with the bride moving around the tulasi plant and the bridegroom while the bridegroom sits in the middle. The bride moves around seven times and at the end of every round is given flowers by the helper of the bride who, then, showers them on the groom and folds her hands (*namaskar*) in front of the groom.

The ceremony starts with the bridegroom being taken near the tulasi, and is then made to sit on the seat arranged for him. Then the Brahmin priest recites the mantras in Sanskrit and makes the bridegroom propitiate the god. Later the bride enters the ceremonial area. Before the bride goes around the groom seven times, they are both made to sit together with the bride sitting on the left-side of the groom, with the palms of their right hands placed on each other. The Brahmin priest places a banana leaf, a coconut, and any *Chang* number[16] of bananas in the hands of the two. While chanting mantras, he starts reciting both their genealogies. During this recitation the relatives from the bride's side come up one by one, and after prostrating in front of the priest, offer money on a banana leaf which is also placed in the hands of both the bride and the groom.

Once the bride completes seven rounds around the groom, she is again seated on his left hand side. She then puts two garlands around his neck, one of which is taken out by the groom and put around the bride's neck. With this, the ceremony is complete.

The members of the immediate families of both the groom and the bride then prostrate themselves in front of each other and in front of the three apokapas; Atiya Sidaba, Sanamahi, and Pakhangba. Then the couple is taken inside the bride's house where they exchange *paana* (betel leaf and betel nut).

Before the actual ceremony of the marriage, there are various stages which have to completed. These are:

(a) *Hainaba:* This is the initial proposal offered by the parents of the boy to the girl's family.

In a completely arranged and 'ideal' condition, the boy's family[17] bring gifts and fruits along with them when they go to the girl's

[16] Any odd number, An odd number symbolizes 'life' in Meitei belief.
[17] Not only the parents, but the entire family takes an active part.

family. If the latter regards the union as unsuitable, negotiations stop immediately; and if it is regarded as a possibility, then horoscopes are read. If found favourable, a meeting is arranged between the elders of both the families.

(b) *Yathang Ithanaba:* This is an official announcement of the marriage, where the elder males of both the families prostrate themselves before one another.

(c) *Waroipot Puba:* The contract is finalized with the groom's family visiting the girl's house with their relatives.

(d) *Heijingpot:* This is one of the most detailed and important ceremonies, held only a few days before a marriage. It is a declaration by both sides to all those interested about the announcement of marriage. To substantiate the declaration fully, the groom's family makes a visit, with all their relatives and friends, to the bride's house. They bring fruits and other offerings for the sagei apokpa[18] of the girl's side. These offerings must include, besides fruits, *Heikru* (anwala fruit) and *Heining*,[19] a *Laiphanek* and *Laiphi*[20] These gifts are offered to the *Lai* when all the guests have departed but not before betel leaf and betel nut are distributed. Elder members of both the groups prostrate themselves in front of one another. After the fruits are offered to the *Lai* these have to be eaten by the household members, not by outsiders. With this ceremony the marriage is publicly confirmed.

One day before the marriage, the groom is formally invited to the wedding by a male relative of the bride. The wedding takes place in the girl's house. On the day of the wedding, when the groom and his relatives and friends arrive at the bride's house, he is escorted in by a woman, whose eldest child must be a son and still living, who is not a widow, and who has been married according to proper rituals.[21]

Elopement is also an accepted form of marriage, although parents do express their helplessness in such a situation, and get the couple married. Once the girl and the boy have eloped, the boy's parents are supposed to take responsibility and inform the girl's parents the

[18] Ancestor of the lineage group.

[19] A large species of hog-plum.

[20] Both the words refer to the cloth meant for the deity.

[21] These are the essential criteria for any woman who is assigned any major ritual role.

next day. Sometimes, if the girl's parents find the match unsuitable or if they feel that the boy's family does not have an equal status or for any other reason, then they could refuse. Then either the girl is sent back to her parent's house or, if the boy and girl are insistent, the groom's parents get them married, without the intermediate stages. The girl's family does not participate in such a marriage. The boy's parents generally honour his choice even if they don't like the match. But after that the girl is not allowed to come to her natal house by her own parents.

It is only after the *Mangani Chakouba,*[22] which is a feast given by the girl's family, that the girl is officially declared married among the relatives of the girl. In case of marriage after elopement, non-performance of this feast implies that the girl's parents have still not accepted the marriage. Hence, if after elopement the marriage is performed by the boy's parents, the girl's parents can not, at a later stage, accept the marriage without holding a feast. This feast is called the *Loukhatpa* ceremony.

When I studied the whole marriage ritual carefully, I observed that the elements of Hindu rituals, involving various vows by the couples, the ritual of the bride and the groom going around the fire seven times, and most importantly, *saptapadi* (taking seven steps together by both the bride and the groom)[23] are not present in the Meitei Hindu marriage. The bride going around the groom and offering him flowers with folded hands symbolizes that the bridegroom is considered a god by the bride and it emphasizes the rise of patriarchal notions in the society, after the advent of Hinduism. But, this ceremony constitutes only a very small part of the whole marriage ritual. Singing of *Sankirtan* (devotional songs) which is a distinctive Hindu element constitutes the major part and the various stages before the consummation of marriage.

According to one old woman, such rituals were conspicuously absent in the earlier system of Meitei marriage, that is, before Hinduism.

We did not have a tradition of the groom's party coming to the bride's house and the bride circling around the groom etc. In the traditional marriage system known as *Mara* marriage, no such elaborate rituals were observed. The

[22] The feast on the fifth day after the marriage.

[23] Taking seven steps together along with the seven vows symbolizes the auspicious beginning of married life.

prospective bride with the prospective groom accompanied by his six unmarried friends would go to the *Sinaisum*[24] to collect cotton and weave cloth for seven elders each, of both the sides. They would do this within thirty days after which they would offer *Heijing Kharai* to the salai deities in the village. They would then bring fire from the respective places, for example, the Mangangs would bring fire from Koubru, the Luwangs from Marjing hill, Angoms from Nongmaijing, the Khabas from Ukhun Tongei, etc. A fire would be lit in the village and the marriage would be accomplished by praying before the fire.

The boy and the girl would not spend the night together before marriage. Two days before the marriage, in the village, boys and girls would perform the *Thabal Iroi Shakpa*[25] for the welfare and longevity of the couple.

After these ceremonies the parents and friends of the groom would take the girl to the village of the groom.

There used to be no dowry system, only certain dresses were given to the girl for daily use and for ceremonial purposes, which were kept in the *phiruk* (covered basket), and also an earthen pot for carrying water.

Hence, marriage, like any of the other rites, was about propitiating the ancestors and taking their blessings.

Death Ceremonies

According to one maiba, these were not elaborate but very simple in the pre-Hindu era. The dead were buried. The practice of cremation started only with the advent of Hinduism, and as he said, also due to an increase in population which necessitated an economy of space. In Imphal, every salai, including that of the Brahmins, has particular places for cremating their dead. After the advent of Hinduism, if a non-Brahmin with a high status, and a good moral background dies, the Brahmins allow the family of the deceased to cremate the dead in the place traditionally allocated to them. This is considered a special mark of respect to the deceased.

However, in the pre-Hindu era the dead person was buried along with his personal belongings, like pots, etc. On the fifth day after the death, the relatives offered flowers and fire on the burial place,

[24] Name of a place.
[25] Singing in a group in the moon light.

which was called *Leihoon Tamba*. There was no other ceremony—no *Shradha* and no *asthi sanchaya*.[26]

Nongkaba, Nongmangba, Lai oikhiba, and *Shiba* are words commonly used to mean death. The meaning of these words will give us a clue as to what death means to Meitei people.

Nongkaba - (Nong—the ultimate god, Kaba—to climb, or to go up). Nongkaba, then means climbing towards the ultimate god.

Lai oikhiba - (Lai—the divine god, Oikhiba—has become). The individual has become divine, or it may also mean the return to the divine home.

Shiba - (Shi—death, ba—to be).

The first three terms are words of etiquette that are used with respect to address elders and public figures and the last one is used more commonly than the above three, and in a more informal way.

Death then means the meeting of the soul with the divine or the soul itself becoming divine. Hence death is just another rite of passage leading to the stage of divinity. It is not the end.

There is a text called *Nonglon Pathup Wachetlon Puya* according to which there are three life streams within the body. They are called *Kha-Khong, Lai-Khong,* and *Malang-Khong* (Khong literally means stream). One of these, Lai-Khong leads to Leimaren (the supreme mother) who sits in the heart. When the equilibrium of the elements in the body is disturbed, the five souls come up to Leimaren. Shouting 'Hou-Hou', she comes up towards the head flowing towards the course of Lai-Khong, where Atiya Sidaba (the supreme father) is seated. All the *Thawais* (souls) then merge in *Ningsha* (breath of life) and move out and merge with Atingkok (the father void). It is then that the person is declard dead.

It is believed that immediately after the death, the dead person goes to a place called *Khonghampat*[27], which literally means the place for washing feet. He/she then passes by the *Makhoinungong* hill (the name itself means regret at the sorrow of separation), from where he/she crosses the stream and goes to *Thongak,* the main gate of the land of death, where *Thongak Lairembi*, who guards the gates of the abode of death meets them. Here they refresh themselves with water which is placed in two pots, one for adults and the other for

[26] Collection of bones and ashes of the deceased by his relatives.
[27] A mythical pond in the north of Kangla.

children. Thereafter, they pass into the place of the dead, from where they are reborn in the human world.

As said earlier, since the sun is considered the mother, the origin of life too is from there. It is handed over to the moon (*Apanba*), the moon gives it over to *Thaba* (evening star), then to *Sachik* (morning star), then to *Okpuroi* and then to the man who would be the father. The father keeps it for two months, after that it is given to the mother who receives it as a seed inside her womb. That is why the traditional term for father is *Ipan Panthou*, (implying the one who kept me for two months). The mother, since after taking it, took care of it, is called, *Thanglen Irubi Ima.*

According to an RK from Sagolband, earlier the disposal of dead bodies used to be of three types, and people could choose any one of these modes: by earth (burial), by wind (placed in the open space), and by fire (cremation).

After embracing Vaishnavism, King Pamheiba decided that the bodies would be burnt according to the rites of Hinduism. Since then the Brahmins became the conductors of rituals connected with death. But it was only after the maiba had declared the person as officially dead[28] that that the Brahmins could take over.

Death should not take place inside the house, if possible. The dying person should be carried out through the left side of the house called Mangsok and placed in Khangpok, a small thatched hut constructed outside near the tulasi plant. The dead body is then placed in a wooden coffin.

The body is bathed before cremation and dressed while still inside the hut. Wood, four bamboo poles, a canopy, and a beam from the house are transported to the cremation ground reserved for the persons of that particular salai. The fire should also be carried from the house of the deceased. It is placed on seven layers, the ground being the first one, with three horizontal and three vertical lines of wood being placed above it. In one RKs opinion, the seven layers could signify the seven salais, as it is believed that since a human being is created by god, he/she should be treated as a member of all the seven salais, a member of the whole composite Meitei society. According to him, there can be another interpretation. Since a person is made of five ingredients, [29] plus the mind and *mi* (shadow),

[28] See Chapter 4.

[29] Fire, air, water, earth and sky.

constituting a total of seven elements, these layers may also be a symbol of these seven elements.

After the cremation is over a small mound of earth is made, on which some mustard seeds are sown in seven lines. These seven lines indicate seven obstacles, so that death does not frequent the family. Similar rituals apply for both men as well as women.

Soon after the cremation, all the mourners take a bath in the river/pond and only then start towards home. On reaching home, they cross a lit fire, so that the evil spirits do not come inside the house. The house is completely washed and so are the utensils. The bedding of the deceased is removed and burnt.

A ceremony on the thirteenth day, the *Shradha* has been added to the rituals pertaining to death ceremonies with the influence of Hinduism. Till that day the family does not take fish or any non vegetarian food and is supposed to take only boiled food with salt. The dress worn by mourners is a white dhoti and a white *chadar* (sheet) for men and a white chadar and a beige coloured phanek for women.

The *asthi* (bones) and the ashes of the deceased used to be collected on the third day. These had been placed in a bamboo tube and buried on the left side of the courtyard formerly, but with the advent of Hinduism, the asthi and ashes are collected and put in a silk cloth, to be taken to the Hindu holy places—Nabadweep, Vrindavan, Puri, and Haridwar for immersion in the holy river at all these places after the shradha ceremony is completed.

Not only the immediate mourners but the whole sagei is subject to dietary restrictions until the shradha. Sankirtan (devotional songs) again form the essential feature of the whole ceremony.[30] After this, every month of the first year, on the day the death occurred, a feast is arranged which is called *Tha-gi Utsav*.[31] The maiba who had declared the death is specifically invited on all the feasts. After the first year these feasts are held once every year on the month and day of the death, for as long as the family can afford it.

Spirits of dead infants are believed to be malicious and are called *Soren*. Therefore, a ceremony is performed to prevent the dead child from re-entering the mother's womb, otherwise it is believed that her

[30] This also constitutes an important part of the marriage ceremony.
[31] The monthly feast.

next child too would die in a similar manner. This ceremony is called *Laiyu Panthaba.*

A *Chang* (in any odd number) bunch of bananas is placed on the verandah of the house, with some betel nuts and some fruits (chang represents life form). They are placed on a cloth, and if the child was a girl these things are placed on a skirt. The maibi then addresses the spirit;

> We have now given you all this food and clothing, be content, go and do not return.

Three months later, an earthen pot, rice flour, a chang (odd numbered) bunch of bananas, and two *Si* (even numbered) bunch of bananas, betel leaf and nut, and six clothes for the spirit of the child are placed on a winnowing fan. Things like a betel nut that is about to sprout, a lime, and a *dhoop* (incense) are collected, and taken by the maibi, who then faces the northern direction towards the Koubru hill after the sunset. A portion of the offering is offered to the malignant spirit *Lamjasara Lathokpa*. Then the spirit of the baby *Soren Thingatpa* is laid to rest by the maibi while praying to Atiya Sidaba, requesting that the spirit should accept the offerings and not return again. A lime is then given to the parents which is first wrapped and nursed, and hidden secretly. Only when the spirit is believed to have been appeased, is the lime taken out as a symbol of another child and taken back by the parents.

According to Meitei belief, the life cycle of a person is complete, only after seven generations, from *Iputhou Purel* (great-grandfather) to grandson. The soul of the great grandfather travels till his great grandson, and then the life cycle is completed. From *Iputhou Purel* to *Iputhou*, to *Ipu* (grandson), to *Ipa* (father), to *Isha* (the self), then *Icha* (son) and *Ishu* (grandson). Ishu also means completion, completion of the life cycle. This life cycle is called *Langon Taret.* Since the cycle of seven generations is a continuous process rather than a closed set, it therefore implies that the cycle actually continues with the soul getting transferred to the next generation.[32] Hence, death is not seen as the end but only a stage in this process of life cycle.

[32] Since the seven generations will continue to add and subtract.

Yearly Public Rituals

I am cosmopolitan, but I believe in god. It may be Krishna, Sanamahi, or Allah. If I say I believe in Krishna, and if you say you believe in Allah, should I deny your god? No, No, religion is one thing, and practice (rites and rituals) another. So, Sanamahi is very important to us. When Garibniwaz realized his mistake of destroying old texts, even after establishing Gauriya Vaishnavism as a state religion, he brought the idol Sanamahi from Wangoi in the south of Imphal. The Brahmin pundits rose against him, but he made a temple and installed the idol there. This temple is still there on the premises of the first Manipur Rifles, cantonment area. It is made of bronze. Though we have embraced Gauriya Vaishnavism, we still have Sanamahi in our homes. He is as important as Krishna. Sanamahi is considered part and parcel of our lives. Now, even the Brahmins worship him, especially when they want to ward off illness from the family. Sanamahi is worshipped by everybody and so is Krishna. We believe in all kinds of gods. We worship Durga, Laxmi, Mahadeva (Shiva)—every god.

An informal conversation with an RK was fairly illustrative of what people in general think about Krishna, in relation to Sanamahi, or Gauriya Vaishnavism in relation to the Meitei faith. As can be seen, the people respect the Brahmins, as much as they respect any of the other traditional scholars. They are the ones who can officiate at the Hindu rites and festivals, since they know Sanskrit which is a foreign tongue for the Meiteis. But except for the *Shlokas* (Sanskrit religious couplets), which the Brahmins recite, the Sankirtan (devotional songs) have now been translated into Meiteilon (Meitei language), and are sung collectively by the Meiteis, in a distinctive style of their own.

Hence, without any confrontation, as is evident from the above quoted conversation, the Meiteis celebrate the Hindu festivals related to Krishna, with as much devotion as they celebrate their own traditional festivals. An exception consists of those Meiteis, who do not like to attend their own traditional festivals, believing them to be remnants of the primitive stage of their society, and who regard themselves, after having become Hindus, as having reached a 'more civilized' state. There are also some revivalists of the Meitei cult who do not celebrate Hindu festivals. Hindu festivals are celebrated with utmost sincerity and devotion but an element of gaiety, and festivity, which is associated with the celebration of traditional Meitei festivals seems to be toned down while celebrating Hindu festivals. There is usually an atmosphere of formality, awe, seriousness and subdued

behaviour. While in the festival of the Meitei faith, there is spontaneity, gaiety, and informality and enjoyment.

I will now discuss certain important Hindu and Meitei collective festivals that I observed.

Yaoshang (Holi)

It is celebrated on the full moon day of the month of *Lamta* (February-March). In Manipur its celebration lasts for six days. It also marks the advent of the season of spring that is symbolized in the throwing of various colours on one another, as well as in the air.

In Vrindavan, where Krishna was brought up in a cowherd family, Holi celebrations involve the enactment of Krishna's flirtatious games with Radha and other gopis. Krishna, Radha and other gopis were cowherds. Radha is considered his divine consort. Most of the devotional songs describing Krishna and Radha are songs describing their merry-making on Holi.

It is this context, which is highlighted in the *Yaoshang* festival of Manipur, where boys stroll on the streets and pass light flirtatious remarks to girls, and the young girls wait for the groups of boys to come near and then pour buckets full of coloured water on them.

The myth behind celebrating Holi in north India relates to Holika sitting in a fire with the boy Prahlad—a devotee of Vishnu—in her lap with the intention of burning him. Prahlad due to his devotion is saved while Holika is burnt. But the myth behind Holi in Manipur is completely different from that of the rest of north India. This myth is in fact borrowed from Bengal from where the particular sect of Hinduism (Gauriya Vaishnavism) came.

Chaitanya, the founder of this particular sect of Vaishnavism is believed to have been born at the time of Yaoshang(Holi). Chaitanya, who was a well known devotee of Krishna, was taken to be an incarnation of Krishna in Manipur. This historical personality is made a god instead of being considered a devotee of god. In the morning of the day of Yaoshang, a bamboo hut is constructed and placed by the side of the road. These huts are called *Yaoshang*. Around afternoon, an image of Chaitanya is placed in the hut by the local Brahmin. Puja and recital of devotional songs (Kirtan) praising Lord Krishna follow. The image is then taken out and the hut is burnt, which indicates the beginning of the festival. Every night, during this

festival, young boys and girls of every locality dance in groups which is known as *Thabal Chongba.*[33]

The elders however celebrate in a more formal and devotional manner. They go to the Sri Gobindajee temple located in the palace ground area. Groups of singers singing devotional songs congregate here and enter the dance arena to get themselves wet with colour sprinkled on them by the Brahmin priests. This is called *Pichkari.* This marks the beginning of the Yaoshang. These *Kirtan mandalees,*[34] who had gone to various houses singing bhajans in praise of Chaitanya and Lord Krishna for six days congregate again at Vijay Gobinda temple[35] all the time singing bhajans and addressing each other with 'Hari bol' (say Hari) and 'He Hari' (Hail Hari). The women, dressed as gopis, then dance in the style of the *Raas Lila* with colourful sticks in their hands. Getting beaten by them is considered a good fortune.[36] The essence of Yaoshang seems to lie here. The Gobindajee temple used to be maintained by the king. Now it is maintained by a trust. On the day of Yaoshang the head Brahmin priest mounts a horse, clad in spotless white, with a white umbrella, and arrives at Vijay Gobinda temple. He has to carry the *Vishnu Chakra.* If he does not come to the Vijay Gobinda temple on this ritual day, the relations between the Gobindajee temple and the Vijay Gobinda temple can get immediately severed.[37]

On asking as to why the Vijay Gobinda temple was built when the Gobindajee temple was already there, I was told that when the first idol of Krishna was made from the wood of the jack fruit tree, it did not match with the idol which had appeared in King Bhagyachandra's dream. The king presented it to the ancestor of the RKs residing in this place. This ancestor was Nongthang Laikhongba, who was Bhagyachandra's uncle. A second idol matching Bhagyachandra's dream image was installed in the Gobindajee

[33] It means dancing in the moonlight.
[34] Groups of devotional singers.
[35] It is in the Sagolband area and is maintained by the RKs of Mantrimayum sagei residing there.
[36] I was also dragged by an old woman to get beaten by these sticks.
[37] This ritual obligation reflects the assertion of the bond between the RKs and MKs in the political sphere.

temple. Therefore the visit of the chief priest of the Gobindajee temple to the Vijay Gobind temple affirms this long standing relationship.

Bhagyachandra was the king, who is believed to have dreamt many things that are considered landmarks in the history of Manipur. In a series of dreams, he saw the idol of Krishna. Krishna himself told him to make an idol of His image from the wood of the jack fruit tree. In another dream he visualized the Manipuri *Raaslila*, with specified dresses and specified dance movements. In fact, it was not a dance, but a way to show devotion to Lord Krishna. In his dream, Krishna told him to keep the idol in the courtyard so that when the raaslila was performed, he would enter the idol and perform with the other participants. Since it was not a dance but a religious ceremony, certain codes were prescribed, which are followed till today. Raas is to be performed after midnight and it continues till dawn. It has to be performed at specific times at specific places. While the raas is being performed only the Meiteis can come inside the pandal while non-Meiteis have to stand outside. When the raas begins the performers becomes divine and hence are not to be defiled by the audience. The performers have to look down and are not to move their waist. The person enacting Krishna cannot be more than seven years old but the gopis have no age limit.[38]

People generally felt inhibited to discuss *raas* with me. On asking the reason, they said that the relationship of Radha and Krishna is like the relationship of two lovers, which should not be discussed openly, since it was intimate and private.

In yet another dream, Krishna commanded Bhagyachandra to tell his own daughter Sija Lairoibi to play the role of Radha, which was at once obeyed.

Picking up and elaborating upon, only the amorous relationship between Radha and Krishna is not very alien to the concept of the copulation of the supreme *Pa* and *Pi*. Raaslila was the dance, modified from the steps of Lai-haraoba, which is the performative aspect of the whole fertility cult.

[38] The age of the person playing Krishna is restricted to enable the performers to show without any inhibition the amorous relationship between Krishna and the gopis during the *Raaslila*.

Kang Jatra (Rath Yatra)

Worship of Krishna as *Jagannath* (Lord of the World) in Manipur is similar to that in Puri in the state of Orissa. The procession in which Krishna, in the form of Jagannath is taken out in a chariot, is called *Rath Yatra* (Chariot journey) in Puri; its adopted form in Manipur is called *Kang Jatra* (*Kang* means chariot). It is believed to have been introduced during the reign of Gambhir Singh around 1825. It is held in the second new moon of *Inga* (June–July), until the tenth day. The chariot is constructed with money from public contributions. The images which are taken out in procession are of Krishna, Balaram (Krishna's brother), and Subhadra (Krishna's sister). They are accompanied by two Brahmins with two Meitei girls holding fans behind the idols. The worshippers themselves draw the chariot and offer *aarti*, flowers, and fruits whenever the chariot halts. *Aarti* is a special offering, believed to be most acceptable to gods. Aarti is offered to the chanting of *bhajans* (devotional songs) and to the accompaniment of the beat of the *pung* (Manipuri drum), *jhan* (large cymbals), gongs, bells, conch, etc. The *aarti* is partially burnt which is used to mark the foreheads of the worshippers, and then placed in front of the doors of the houses to ward off evil spirits.

The main procession and the biggest chariot starts from the Gobindajee temple, which witnesses great pomp and show. Smaller processions are taken out in every *leikai* (locality), where the god and his brother and sister are taken out in much smaller chariots, and after taking a round in the locality are brought back and re-installed in the locality temples. The main chariot also, after taking a round of the area around the Palace Ground, comes back to the Gobindajee temple where the idols are re-installed.

The procession is really exemplary. It is an occasion on which splendour and ceremony are in beautiful combination, along with discipline and strict formalities. People behave very devoutly and with a certain kind of humility.

Janmashthami

Besides these two Hindu festivals, Janmashthami (the birth of Lord Krishna) is another festival celebrated by the Hindu Meiteis with complete religious fervour. It is celebrated on the eighth day of the new moon in the month of *Thawan* (July–August). The story behind the birth of Lord Krishna is similar to the story that is prevalent in

north India. Twenty four hours immediately before midnight—the time of Krishna's birth, people observe a fast which is broken only in the early hours of the morning. Starting from some hours before midnight till early morning the next day, the Gobindajee temple is crowded by people who gather to hear the Brahmins reciting the stories of the birth and life of Krishna. This is another occasion when groups from each locality present *raas lilas* in various local temples dedicated to Lord Krishna.

These are the three main festivals which the Manipuris adopted after the advent of Hinduism, as a state religion. Since its declaration as an official religion, these festivals are celebrated with an official and professional aura around them.

Cheiraoba, Lai-haraoba, and *Heikru Hidongba* are the three festivals with their roots in traditional Meitei religion. While Cheiraoba and Lai-haraoba retain their original characteristics, Heikru-Hidongba is one festival which has incorporated some Hindu beliefs as we will see in the following paragraphs.

Lai-haraoba

Lai-haraoba[39] according to L. Bhagyachandra Singh, 'mirrors' the entire culture of Manipur. Lai-haraoba, which is about the happiness of the gods after they created the world of human beings, is celebrated in every *leikai* (locality), and every region's *laiphams* (place of gods), but not everywhere at the same time. Everybody distinguishes basically three types of Lai-haraoba. The *Kanglei Lai haraoba* is celebrated in the core Meitei area in the central portion of the Imphal Valley. This is around Kangla, where the main deity is Pakhangba, the supreme ancestor of the royal/Ningthouja salai. The second type is *Moirang Lai-haraoba,* which is celebrated in Moirang, near the Loktak lake. It has maintained a distinct culture of its own. The third one is called *Chakpa Lai-haraoba,* which is observed at the peripheries around Imphal, by people, who are believed to be the earliest settlers among the Meitei inhabitants. Their Lai-haraoba is considered most authentic and original, devoid of any outside influence whatsoever. These distinctions are more on the basis of regions rather than on the basis of completely different

[39] The beliefs pertaining to this festival have already been discussed in the earlier chapter. Hence we shall discuss its rituals.

rituals. All these types symbolize the happiness of god after creating the *malem* (world). There are, of course, slight differences, in timing, difference in ancestors, and differing emphasis on myths pertaining to creation, as well as history. But they all are mostly held between April and July each year. There are some stages in this celebration which are common to all these three types:

1) *Lai-Ikouba* : Summoning of the spirit of the *Lai* (god).
2) *Laipou* : Celebration of its birth, and
3) *Lairoi* : Last rites, when gods and people take vows before bidding farewell for the year.

Besides these, there is *sharoi-khangba* (warding off, of the evil spirits), which is a compulsory ritual to prevent evil influences from affecting the celebration.

Apart from the presence of these three common stages in all the three kinds of Lai-haraoba, the Moirang Lai-haraoba emphasizes and portrays the story of Khamba and Thoibi, the divine lovers of Moirang, who were considered devout worshippers of Lord Thangjing, the deity worshipped in the Lai-haraoba. In fact this performance has a separate name, and is called the *Moirang Parva.* It shows the hardships faced by the two orphans Khamba and his elder sister Khamnu, who have royal ancestry, but cannot gain from it since they have been orphaned. There are moving episodes of their growing up, under the care of a Kabui chief; of the increasing bravery of Khamba, and of the increasing affection of Khamnu towards him. She never lets him feel that he is an orphan. She labours hard. Khamba becomes a public figure, through his brave fights with a fierce bull and a ferocious tiger, which are both manifestations of Lord Thangjing. During these events he meets Thoibi, the princess of Moirang and they both fall in love and after a series of obstacles, mainly created by Nongban, the villain, with the blessings of Lord Thangjing, are tied in a nuptial knot, only to be separated soon after that. Thoibi mistakenly takes Khamba to be a thief when he comes stealthily and she unknowingly kills him, and then herself, and dies near her loved one. This story is told in various episodes through its enactment on stage to the accompaniment of music of the *penna,* a musical instrument, lasting for at least eleven days. But this story is only in addition to the ritual stages mentioned above which are compulsory steps for all the Lai-haraobas. We shall take each step, one by one.

(1) *Lai-Ikouba (*summoning of the spirit of Lai)
Various preparations are made for the Lai-Ikouba ceremony, and this involves dressing up the Lai a day before this ceremony, which is called *Lai-phi-shetpa.* The male deity's clothes are kept on the right side, and the female deity's on the left. Then starts the decoration of two small pots in which the souls of Lai have to be brought back. Nine strands of banana leaves are turned toward the earth and tied at the rim of the pot, where the nine strands represent the nine *Laibungthous* (male gods), who are drawn out from the supreme father, and the downward facing of leaves symbolize the phallus ready to pierce the earth. Seven strands of banana leaves, turned upwards towards the sky are tied to the other pot representing the seven *Lainous* (virgin goddesses) born from the supreme mother. The leaves in this case facing upward symbolize the willingness of these female deities to be penetrated. Coins of gold, representing the father are put in the pot with leaves facing downward for the divine father and coins of silver representing the divine mother are put in the other pot with leaves facing upward.

On the day of the Lai-Ikouba, that is on the next day, people start gathering at the temple from the afternoon. The possessions of the Lai which are, footwear, swords, mirrors, tumblers, pots, pans, fans, etc., are carried by unmarried girls. Young males carry the sword, banners, and canopies. The earthen pots in which the spirit of the Lais would be placed are carried by the two *pibas* (heads) of the locality. All these preparations are done by the maibis.[40] A woman, who had been married 'properly' with parental engagement, whose first born is a son, who is still alive, carries the big pitcher—*Isaifu,* to be filled with water from the river, which would represent the supreme mother, who gave birth to all the living things. The procession then starts off for the selected area of the river. Along the way, the maibis dance the *Laihou Jagoi*[41] and lead the procession. Behind them the penna players, the maibas, sword bearing youth in two rows, maidens with the brass vessels, Lai bearers, the Isaifu bearer, and *chong* (umbrella) bearers accompany the pibas holding the two pots.

[40] The maibis seem to be the directors who direct the gods as well as the people to enact the rituals, as well as, the gestures for the successful completion of this festival.

[41] A particular form of dance meant for inviting the gods.

At the river bed, the head maibi holds two pieces of coins—one gold (male), and the other silver (female) on the palm of her right hand and lowers her hand inside the water. The hand is withdrawn once the coins are inside the water. Then the maibi requests the Sky Father who lives nine layers above the sky and the Mother Earth who lives seven layers below the earth to come to the earth. The way the coins float and sink are symbolic representations of whether the year would be prosperous, and whether the deities had been pleased. This is called *Konyei Thaba.*

Next is *Khuyom Lakpa* in which the maibi, covering her head with a cloth offers the raw food, comprising of eggs, uncooked rice, the *Langthrei* plant wrapped up in banana leaves and tied with bamboo strips, in two earthen pots by sinking them in the river, holding the one meant for the Sky Father in the right hand, and that for Mother Earth in the left hand. The maibis then take out the two earthen pots, and give them to the two pibas, who are made to stand on the banana leaves. The threads attached to these pots are in the hands of the head maibi and are also dipped in the water. The maibi then completely covers herself with a white cloth and sits down with a bell in her hand. She then gets into a trance with a lot of jerking and loud sighs. She speaks in broken syllables and pronounces oracles. The ritual birth of Lai and its transference into the pots held by the pibas is performed by the maibas and maibis by pulling up the strings and shouting 'Hee! Hee!' With the strings carefully placed, the procession starts. However, before that the maiba gathers water in a big pitcher from a particular direction. The four directional deities are worshipped before that. This pitcher representing mother Leimaren is given to a woman with 'high morals'.[42] On their way back, the maibis dance, swaying in a completely uninbited manner.

Once inside the temple,[43] the enthronement of the deities takes place. It is called *Phambal Langba*. The maiba touches the navel of the image of Lainingthou with the thread from the pot, and the maibi does the same with Lairembi, symbolizing the infusion of spirit. Then the maibi holds the two threads together signifying the union of the male and female principles. In front of these two images, in the middle, a banana leaf is spread facing downwards. On top are placed

[42] The essential characteristics of whom are discussed earlier.
[43] They enter the temple by crossing a fire so as to purify themselves.

chang (life/odd numbers) bunch of bananas facing downwards, along with a watery, scented, fruit called *Heijrang,* and uncooked rice.

This is known as *Chang Thaba.*[44] Chang bananas facing toward the leaf symbolize the phallus of Lainingthou, the rice signifies the productive power of the female principle, and the heijrang fruit probably represents the semen or, as some people have called it, a 'great cosmic energy'.

(2) *Laipou* (Celebration of the birth of Lai)

This part of the ritual starts with the distribution of flowers offered to the deities among the people. This task is assigned to a person specially selected for this purpose. His main task is to collect the best of flowers to offer to the deities. He is called *Hanjaba*[45] and his assistant is called *Hidang*. This function is also narrated in the story of Khamba and Thoibi, where Khamba is assigned this task and Nongban, the villain of the story, tries to confuse him but Khamba, with the blessings of Thangjing and the *Umang Lai* (forest deity), manages to collect the best of flowers for which he is acclaimed and Nongban's mischievous plan fails.

Next comes the dance by the maibis which is called *Thougal.*[46] It is performed to express complete obedience and loyalty to god. No other person can dance before the maibi starts. Later, the women of the community, after bowing in front of the Lai, follow the dance steps of the maibi.

In the actual Laipao ritual, the maibis direct people to form a procession, with the locality pibas in front, followed by their wives. Next to the pibas stand the umbrella bearers and behind them virgin girls holding Lai's possessions, who are escorted by two male sword bearers. Those in the procession carrying various items relating to the Lai become part of the structure associated with the Lai, and as such do not respond to the call of the maibis as is the case with the rest in the procession.[47]

The maibis then stand in front of the shrine and perform *Laiching Jagoi* (drawing in the Lai) by enacting the effort required to draw

[44] Ritualistic process for the divine copulation.
[45] Who was the leader of the flower collectors.
[46] A dance expressing dedication to the gods.
[47] Since by holding the possessions of the Lai they come under the influence of the Lai.

the Lai towards her body through gestures, placing their palms below the navel in a triangular shape with the tips of their fingers reaching towards their genital organs, symbolizing the birth canal, the passage to the womb. The penna singers start singing the *Hoirou Hoya*[48], which starts at a low tempo becoming very vigorous towards the end. The birth of Lai, the construction of his house, his marriage are all enacted in dance movements of the maibis, amidst the songs of penna singers accompanied by the sound of the drum.

This spectacular ceremony comes to an end with *Lairoi*[49], where the god and the people bid farewell and the god is requested to lie in rest till the next year.[50]

The main functionaries of this festival are the maibis, the maibas, and the penna singers. Their importance is emphasized by the fact that they are regarded as three of the five elements, fire, wind, and water, which are essential for the formation and existence of human beings, the other two being the sky and the earth which are represented by the Lai and the Leimaren.

The seat of precedence is given to members of the royalty. During the times of king's rule, the king and the queen used to sit opposite the shrine but slightly toward the left, so that their eyes did not meet the eyes of the Lai, which would be disrespectful. Towards their immediate right were the seats for the nobles. These seats of precedence are still given to the locality piba. The right side is meant for males and the left is occupied by females. Hence the seating arrangement during the Lai-haraoba depicts the vertical and horizontal relationships of the royalty and commoners, and the different salais, respectively. The division of left and right denotes the sexual codes that are prevalent in society.[51] People of the area where the Lai-haraoba is performed dance with the maibis, while young people perform the Naga and Khamba-Thoibi dance. Peoples' involvement is complete.

[48] The song narrating the divine copulation.

[49] The farewell rituals.

[50] The Meitei gods are not unapproachable. The act of reciprocity seen between the gods and the people is just like that between the salais. This is explained in the chapter on social structure.

[51] This kind of seating arrangement, according to gender, is observed in all kinds of congregations whether public or private.

Cheiraoba

Cheiraoba (announcement of new year with a stick) is the celebration of the advent of the Manipuri new year, which starts from the middle of March in the Manipuri month of *Sajibu*. A man known as *Cheithaba* (the one on whom the stick falls) used to be appointed for a year by the king, and had to bear the responsibilities for any misfortunes or evil befalling the state in that year. This man was given a stick to carry wherever he went, so that he could be easily recognized. He was exempted from any labour and the *lallup*[52] service, and was given land for agriculture and other gifts. This man had to be a Meitei, and no Brahmin, or non-Hindu could hold this unique position. The Cheithaba from the previous year used to sit on the right side of the king and the incoming one on the left side.

The Cheithaba of the previous year would then bow in front of the king and say;

Lainingthou (god king), the coming year
is my friend's year. Let the king and the queen live long, let it be more prosperous than the past year in the production of rice, fish, and other foods, and salt (it was a rare commodity), and let it be richer in everything.

The new entrant would then bow before the king and say:

Lainingthou, from today I bear on my head all your sins, diseases, and misfortunes, shame, mischief, all that is aimed in the battle against you, all that threatens you, and that is bad and hurtful for you and your kingdom.[53]

Hence any national calamity whether natural or man-made is the responsibility of the Cheithaba of that year.

As recent as the time of British rule, when the country faced a cholera epidemic, people in large groups approached the British political agent to punish that year's Cheithaba, since he was believed to be the reason of the disease. I think this office may have been created by the king as a safety valve to escape from any responsibility for the occurrence of any misfortunes in the state, so that for any calamity the Cheithaba, and not the king, was held responsible. That is why the Cheithaba was well rewarded for accepting all the threats and anger of the people. Without any high rewards no one would agree to stake his life for happenings that are beyond his control.

[52] Serving the king of the state for ten out of forty days without any payment.

[53] T.C. Hudson *The Meitheis*, pp. 105–106.

With the end of the rule of the kings this institution also came to an end. Now-a-days the celebration of Cheiraoba involves a complete cleaning of the house, the floor, the walls, the kitchen, and even the utensils. The gardens are trimmed and the whole house welcomes the arrival of the new year, with complete cleanliness and a fresh appearance and free from the 'defilement' of the previous year. The complete overhauling of the house, symbolizes the taking over of a new Cheithaba over the old one.

A special worship of the Sanamahi, the household deity and *Leimaren* (the supreme mother) is conducted. The place where these deities are placed is thoroughly cleaned and seasonal fruits and flowers are offered to them. Three portions of cooked rice, together with cooked vegetables are placed at the *inkhol* (compound) of each house. They are said to be for the Cheithaba of the last year, the Cheithaba of the present year, and that of the coming year. This rite is still practised and affirms faith in the belief of one person absorbing all the misfortunes of the state.

On the morning of Cheiraoba, the elderly women of the household collect rice and vegetables, from other houses, which are offered at a junction of three roads, which are considered the haunting places of evil spirits called *Sharoi Ngaroi* and this ritual is called *Sharoi Khangba.*

Cheiraoba traditionally concludes with a family feast, which is most elaborate with seven or eight dishes which are enjoyed together by all the members of the household. There is an atmosphere of gaiety and festivity, during this family feast.

All the rites pertaining to this festival are basically for the protection of the household and the community from evil spirits. The observance of protective rites is the predominant feature of this day. It is a period of transition between the previous year and the coming year. Mary Douglas would probably term it as a liminal stage. This period symbolizes a phase during which evil spirits are most active, because this day corresponds to their state of existence. They exist in limbo belonging neither to the abode of gods and nor in the abode of human beings. It is at this time that they become active, most eager to take hold of any individual, or household, or the whole community, if it is not completely clean and has not offered food and appeased them.

After the feast, everybody, old and young, starts climbing a hill known as Cheirao-ching. It is a hill named after this festival and is

very popular among all the Meiteis. There is a temple of Shiva on the top, where people worship and come back. This seems strange as, in no other part of the whole ritual of Cheiraoba is there any element of any Hindu worship. Veneration of Shiva, on this day, was perhaps the only way the Meiteis could link their age old festival to Hinduism, or, another possibility could be, that perhaps, it earlier had been a shrine of a deity, who was the main force to protect people from evil influences,[54] but changed to Lord Shiva when Hinduism entered this state.

Heikru Hidongba

Heikru Hidongba is the name given to a boat race, where *Heikru*, is the Meitei name of the anwala fruit, and is eaten only after the completion of the rituals of this festival. Although *Hidongba* implies a boat race, it is not a race in the real sense of the term, since, there are only two boats where, if one team wins the first race, it allows the other team to win the second race. It takes place annually on the eleventh day of *Langban* (September–October) on the canal, near the Vijay Gobinda temple in Sagolband area.

One RK, who is on the managing committee for organizing this festival, told me that this festival started in AD 984 during the reign of Irengba, who according to this RK, was a very obstinate king.[55] The people rose against him, but could not do much as they had no power. Then they took the help of a priest of the traditional faith[56], who was given the title Langol Lukhoi who used his magical power to impress upon the king the feelings of the people. He, with the help of the people, spread a rumour that two giants had come out to destroy the country. Within no time the rumour reached the king, who first did not believe it, as he did not respect the customs and traditions of the society. Then, Langol Lukhoi, by his magical power turned himself into a giant, and at the same time, retained his own self. The big giant came to the king and said, 'Oh king! I came out to destroy your kingdom but I can not do so because of the power of this Langol Lukhoi. So, you should follow the traditions and customs of the society.' Langol Lukhoi in the form of the giant told the

[54] Probably Nongpok Ningthou.

[55] My respondent did not get into the details of this king's normative behaviour.

[56] There were no Brahmins at that point of history.

king to worship Pakhangba and introduced the festival of Heikru Hidongba, and narrated details of the offerings and ways of worshipping and then disappeared. Thus, this festival was introduced and became an important part of the state festivals. Later, some kings kept to the tradition and observed it, while others did not. It was during the reign of King Bhagyachandra, that the forefathers of my respondent in Sagolband told the king to revive this festival, since it had acquired a special meaning in the belief system of this land.

According to this RK, Heikru Hidongba was not a boat race, but the worship of Pakhangba.

Over a period of time the Hindu gods have taken the place of Pakhangba. The worship of Pakhangba by the maibas and maibis, has been replaced by the worship of Lord Krishna by the Brahmin priest presiding in the Vijay Gobinda temple. However the cultural element of this festival still retains its traditional roots.

During the days when Pakhangba was venerated, the night before the race a hookah and pieces of gold and silver were offered to him in the canal by the participants of both the teams.

Each team has twelve members. Six of them wear head gear. They are not the actual participants, but only stand on the boat, representing the four directional deities, and Sanamahi and Atiya Sidaba. These together constitute the essence of a human being.

Consequent to the influence of Hinduism, the offerings by both the teams are made to Krishna and Radha in the Vijay Gobinda temple, although , the objects of offering remain the same—a gold and a silver coin. The next day, images of Krishna and Radha are placed on a raft which is floated in the canal, where the Brahmins conduct an *aarti* and present the offerings given by the participating groups and other spectators, who are standing anxiously on both sides of the canal.

In the past the teams used to be selected from different *pannas* (administrative units), which made for much hostility. Hence now all volunteers, are scrutinized by the managing committee, constituted by RKs of the locality. The leaders of the teams are usually from the RK group. He is dressed up, like a warrior of the traditional era, with full make up on the face, including the lip colour. He is carried in a palanquin by the actual rowers, and stands on the boat, with a body guard who holds him by the waist to maintain his balance. The leader's role is just to stand in the boat, with utmost grace, to present an impressive and decorative image. Behind him and his bodyguard

stand the six men with headgear, representing the various lais. The actual rowers are only four—two in the front, who are called *noumang* and two in the back called *nourungba.*

The boats are beautifully decorated and the race starts with an invocation to Lord Krishna and also to the spirit of the boat which is garlanded by a garland made of 108 *Heikru* and another made from the husk of rice.

The actual race does not seem to hold as much importance as the detailed ritual and religious ceremonies of the whole festival preceding the race. It clearly portrays the switch in loyalty from Pakhangba to Lord Krishna.

From Meitei to Hindu Rituals: The Shift of Power

As stated before, when Hinduism was declared a state religion the king banned the practice of traditional beliefs and rituals, and gave patronage to the festivals revolving around the Vaishnav cult of Hinduism. People seen practicing traditional rituals were put to death and a large number who did not agree to get converted were ex-communicated. Inspite of such restrictions the Meiteis even at the height of Vaishnavism continued to practice their own religion, in secrecy earlier and openly later on.

The 'Hindu' kings extended their patronage to Hindu festivities. Festivals like Yaoshang, Kang Jatra, and Janmashtami are even today testimony to the patronage they got earlier. First of all, these festivals centred around the Gobindajee and Vijay Gobinda temples, which are still under the care of the MKs and the RKs, and are important signifiers of the establishment of Hinduism in the state. Court ceremonialism extended to these political establishments, and the recurrent dreams of Lord Krishna seen by a Meitei 'Hindu' king helped Hinduism firmly establish its roots in this land. People followed its rituals as directed, but most of the time remained mere overt participants. Inspite of the fact that state patronage was taken away and the elaborate and exuberant official arrangements were eliminated, the traditional festivals remained and continued as 'unofficial' private festivals. This distinction is clearly marked even in present times.

The aura and ritual of power, therefore, shifted from Meitei festivals to Hindu festivals under directions from the State apparatus. Hinduism thus became a state religion and Meiteism a 'private'

religion. But this patronage could be extended only to the performative aspects, i.e., the ritual celebrations, for when it came to the belief system, no amount of state power could change the way the Meitei mind wanted to perceive its cosmic world.

It can be said that while Hindu philosophy and the Hindu belief system has influenced the indigenous belief system it has not supplanted it, though all the important rites and rituals are conducted in a Hinduized form, they are not informed by a Hindu philosophy.

6

The Kinship System

The Background

Meitei society was conceptualized as one big family with the king as the head of this family. People recalled the element of fraternity and brotherhood that predominated the ethos of the whole social system. There had to always be an emphasis on knowing one another. This was based on the bond of kin networks, sometimes real, sometimes extended, and sometimes even fictitious. Whatever the case may have been, the spinning of the web of kinship relations was the basis with which people of this small state related to one another. In this web, every elder male became *Pabung* (father), and elder female, *Ima* (mother). Next in hierarchy were *Tamo* (elder brother and *Iche* (elder sister) and the reference for people of the same generation was similar to the affinity between siblings. This unity of siblings (fictitious or extended) is still very strong and crosses family ties.[1] It is more locality oriented than family oriented. All the 'sibs' of the *Leikai* (locality) consider themselves consanguines. Each generation of each locality forms a distinct group. Access to these groups is open only to the people of the same age and same area. For all the others it is a closed group.

When we look at the past through people's memory of it we find that kinship had formed the edifice on which the whole composite Meitei state was formed.

Earlier there were seven independent salais (clans) in Manipur; Ningthouja/Mangang, Luwang, Angom, Moirang, Chenglei, Khaba Nganba, and Khuman. Later in history there came a period when all these seven salais merged into a broader category, to form the Meitei

[1] It is very rare to find a group of people belonging to different generations walking, sitting or even talking together.

state. During this mergence the Ningthouja/Mangang salai subjugated the other six and became the ruling clan. This mergence was not only through force, but also through the development of an ideology that proposed that all the seven salais were parts of one big family. Scholars have sought to provide concrete evidence of it by tracing the ancestors of all the seven salais through Atingkok, the Supreme Father. Myths were woven around this ideology and history was, in a sense recast. Inspite of subjugation of the other six salais, the Ningthouja kings did not emphasize a hierarchical set up, in terms of the 'rulers' versus the 'ruled'. This does not mean that hierarchy was completely absent, yet fraternity and brotherhood did prevail as all the salais were considered children of the same ancestor, Father Atingkok, and his consort Amamba or Taopiloini.

In the figure below of the composite Meitei family we see that all the seven salais are descendants of the six brothers, who are sons of one father, Atingkok. Out of these, the Khuman and Luwang salais are blood siblings and so are the Angom and Ningthouja salais. All the seven salais are related as patrilateral parallel cousins to each other.

Perhaps the idea of putting the entire population into a common kinship frame of fraternity was essential to justify the legitimacy of the rule of one salai over the rest. This mechanism had the significant function of easing out possible tensions or conflicts between the newly formed strata of rulers, and, the ruled. According to one scholar of Manipur,[2] this ideology had been practiced throughout the history of the Meiteis in bringing the several erstwhile autonomous communities into the fabric of a stronger Meitei body having at its apex the ruling salai (Ningthoujas) in its hierarchical arrangement of social organization. The imposition of the rule of the Ningthoujas was balanced by the fraternal feelings injected into the minds of the common people through the all-embracing grand genealogy of all the salais of society tracing the common parentage of Taopiloinai and Atingkok.

One of the foremost tasks of the Brahmins, who converted the Meiteis to Hinduism, was to re-use the familiar ideology of common ancestry by making them descendants of the Saptarishis, the seven Hindu sages who were the sons through copulation of seven planets

[2] The scholar referred to here is Dr H. Borobabu. His view has been quoted from his unpublished thesis on 'The Early Meitei State'.

GRAND GENEALOGY COVERING ALL THE MEITEI CLANS

O—Δ

TAOPILOINAI = ATINGKOK

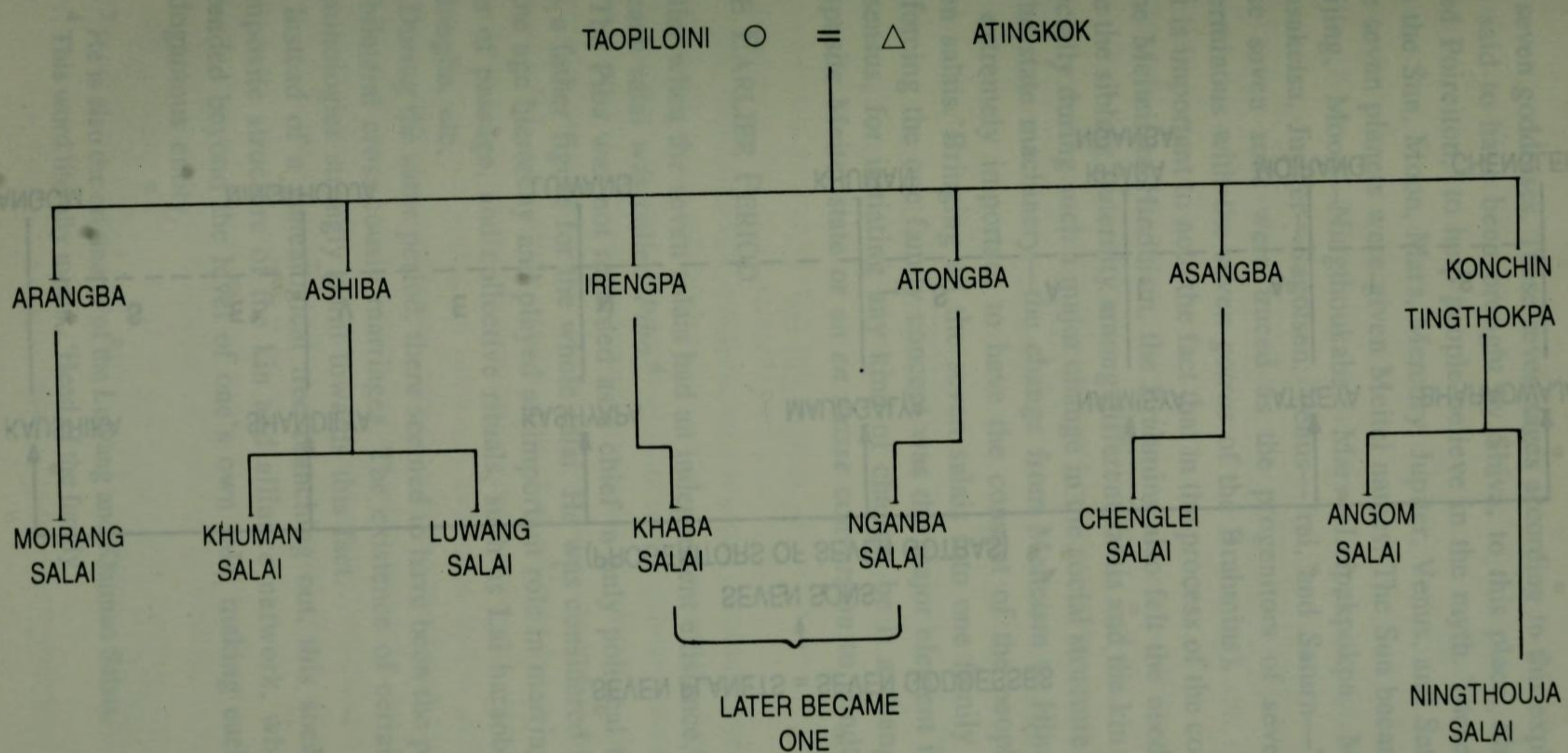
- Arangpa
  - Tumhapa
    - Numu
      - Kurumlen Meineipa
        - Yumchang
          - Yukouren
            - Saba Khing-Khing Langpa
              - Hapu Kakchikpa
                - Uren Hanba
                  - Ngang-Ning-sing
                  - Nganhun tok
                - LEADING TO MOIRANG CLAN
- Ashiba
  - Angaipa
    - Akuppa
      - Nongyai Chari Okpa
        - Nongtamlen Akhuba
          - Nongtamlen Hanba
            - Poireiton
              - Singtapung
                - Arong
                - Pamingnaba
- Irengpa
  - Tangmaringba
    - Leisatao
      - Kanton
        - Tarang Khoinucha
          - Touren Khaba
            - Touren Khuba
              - Toukharen
                - Toutingtou
                - Khaba Leiren
                - Leishanglen
                - Khaba Leichik Chikpa
                - Leitham Thamliba
                - Yuchakha
                - Khaba Yuproi
                - Turum Koiba
                - Loulei Ningthou
                - Khaba Phandongba
                - LEADING TO KHABA CLAN
- Atongba
  - Pamaringba
    - Leikhomtao
      - Tumla Nganba
        - Kurumlen Meinaba
          - Naganba Leichik Chikpa
            - Leitham Thamliba
              - Nganba Yuchakha
                - Nganba Yupuroi
                - Khamchingkon Haiheiba
                - LEADING ON NGANBA CLAN
- Asangba
  - Chaora-Mapam Thiba
    - Chakmaringoa
      - Tam-Maringba
        - Khum-Khum Ningthou
          - Wan
            - Ningthou Kangba Kangkhal
              - Tharong
                - Nungou Yumthangba
                - LEADING TO CHENGLEI CLAN
- Konchin Tingthokpa
  - Leisanglen
    - Leitonglen
      - Leitanglen Tansangba
        - Konsourem
          - Kuptreng
            - Puleiromba
            - LEADING TO ANGOM CLAN
          - Sentreng
            - Ningthem Pakhangba
            - LEADING TO NINGTHOUJA CLAN

LEADING TO KHUMAN CLAN

LEADING TO LUWANG CLAN

KHABA NGANBA CLAN

Source: Haobam Borobabu. *The Early Meitei State and its Formation: an ideological model*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Manipur University, 1988.



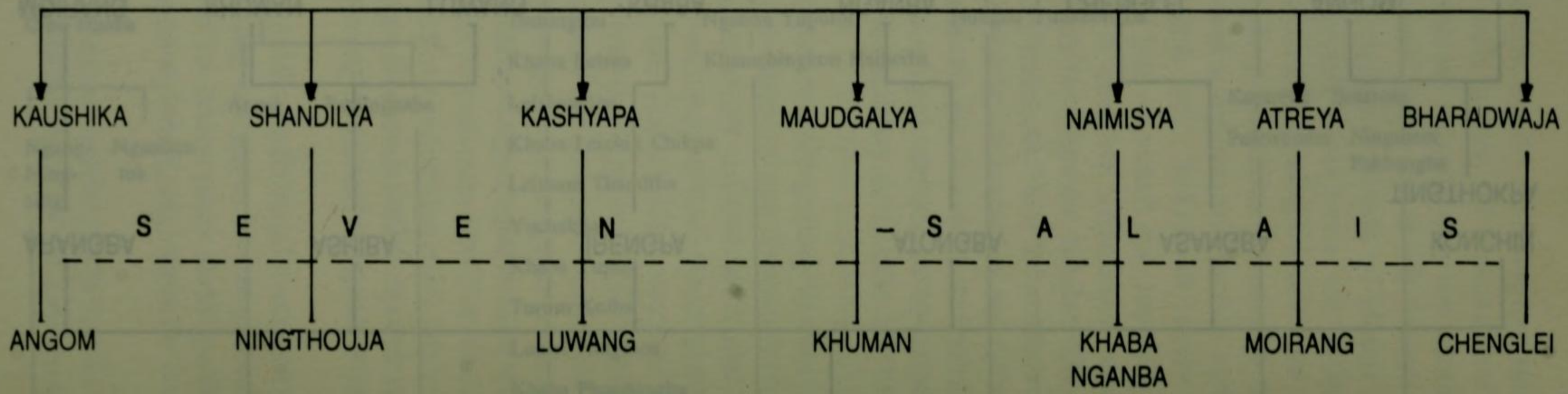
The composite Meitei family

SEVEN PLANETS = SEVEN GODDESSES

↓

SEVEN SONS

(PROGENITORS OF SEVEN GOTRAS)



with seven goddesses. These seven sages according to this explanation, were said to have been brought by Shiva, to this place. Shiva was named Poireiton,[3] to help people believe in the myth. These planets were the Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn. All these seven planets were given Meitei names. The Sun became Nongmaijing, Moon—Ningthoukaba, Mars—Leipakpokpa, Mercury–Yumsakeisa, Jupiter—Sagolsen, Venus—Irai, and Saturn—Thangja. These seven sons were traced as the progenitors of seven salais (coterminous with the seven *gotras* of the Brahmins).

It is important to note the fact that in the process of the conversion of the Meiteis to Hinduism, the Brahmins also felt the need to reinforce the sibling fraternity among different salais and the kin network, especially during such a major change in the social structure imposed by the state machinery—the change from Meiteism to Hinduism. It was extremely important to have the consent of the people of the seven salais. Bringing all the seven salais into one family fold and reinforcing the one family concept was the major element in getting consensus, for initiating any kind of change, be it a change into a composite Meitei state or an *en masse* conversion to Hinduism.

The Earlier Period

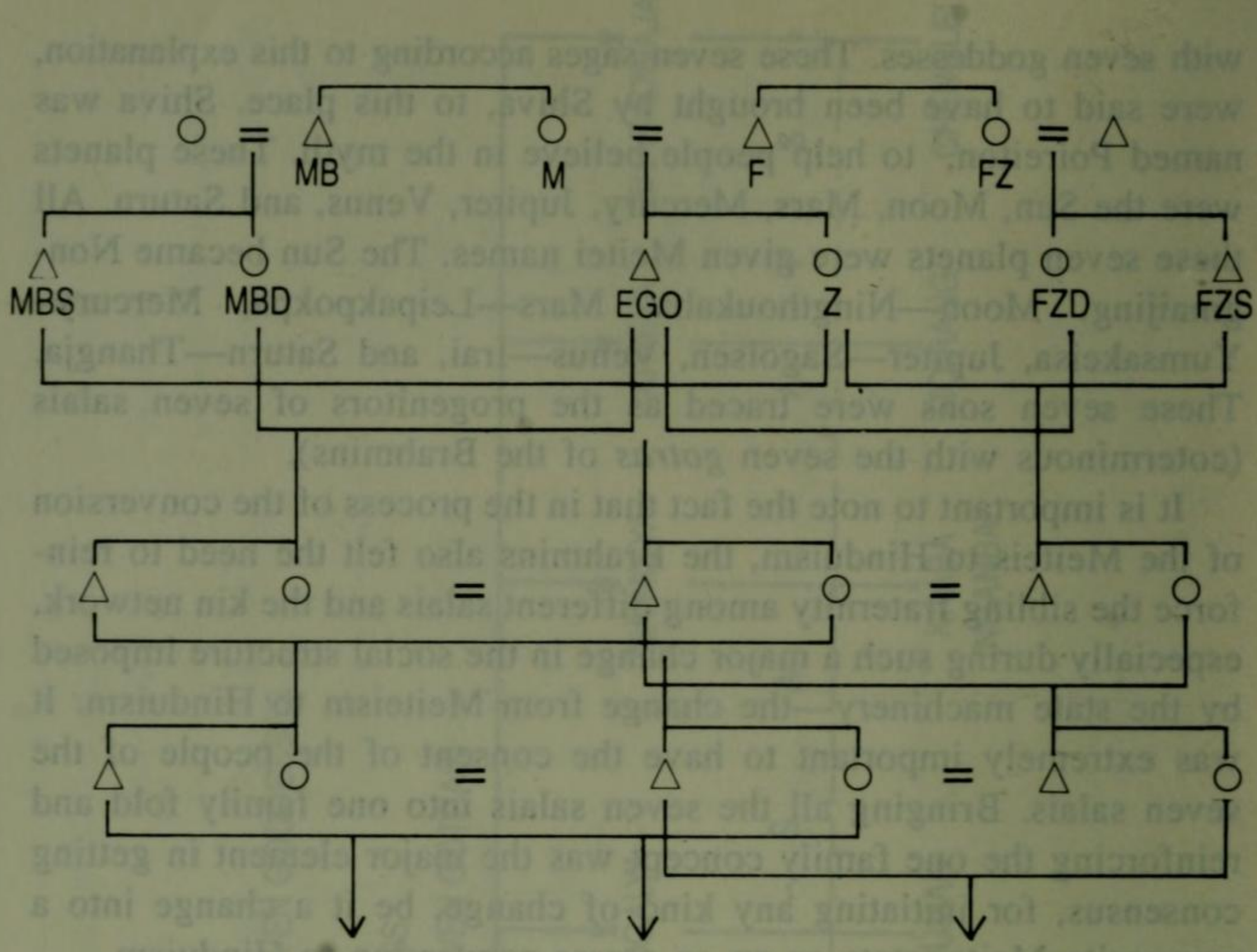
Earlier when the seven salais had an independent existence, the chief of each salai was called *Piba*.[4]

The Piba was not regarded as a chief in only political terms. He was a father figure for the whole salai. He was considered the eldest in the age hierarchy and played an important role in marriages, other rites of passage, and collective rituals, such as Lai haraoba, Heikru Hidongba, etc.

During the same period, there seemed to have been the prevalence of bilateral cross-cousin marriages. The existence of certain kinship terminologies strongly point towards this fact.

Instead of a genealogical tree branching out, this society had a composite structure of the kin and alliance network, which never extended beyond the level of one's own salai making each salai an endogamous entity.

[3] He is also the originator of the Luwang and Khuman Salais.
[4] This word literally means, 'Head of the family'.



An endogamous unit

This endogamous grouping must have strengthened the independent and autonomous existence of each of the seven salais within their own territorial boundaries. Intermarrying between cross-cousins was perhaps a strong factor in creating the tight bond between them and identifying their 'own' as distinct from strangers or 'outsiders'.

There are sub-groups within each salai called the *Sagei*[5] where strict exogamy is maintained. In fact, this sub-group is defined as an organization, which embodies the rules regarding marriage.

We also find that endogamy and bilateral cross-cousin marriages were prevalent along with the prevalence of exogamous relationships with other salais. In fact getting women from other salais may have been instrumental in enhancing one's own position against the other salais.

In analysing the Balinese *dadhias* Geertz has pointed towards a similar aspect. According to him 'the degree to which a *dadhia* could keep its own women and still bring in others from outside was an almost quantitative measure of its status. But unlike dadhias, where

[5] It can be loosely translated as Lineage.

there was preferential endogamy involving marriage with one's father's brother's daughter, there are no signs of the existence of marriage with one's parallel cousin in the salai system, when each salai used to be autonomous, or even later, when they merged and formed a composite Meitei state. And secondly, unlike dadhias who were superior or inferior in relation to each other, the salai system in its autonomous stage seemed to have had no such bearing. All the seven salais seemed to have had an equal status. Instead each salai seemed to have had a hierarchy on the basis of age and sex within their own groups.[6]

Later on, marriages involving people from different salais became more frequent than the earlier pattern of bilateral cross-cousin marriages.[7] Each salai group started building up an exogamous approach compared to the earlier preferential cross-cousin marriages. So much so that a societal norm took root according to which marrying within one's own salai started being considered incestuous.

In the course of time, all the salais were tied to one another in an inextricable chain of affinal ties with the result that conflicts between them disappeared, since each became the others' affinal relative and was bound by the formalities, etiquette, and defined codes of behaviour that is expected from a relative.

Thus, it was the kinship bond which formed the base for the maintenance of political sovereignty and national security. The establishment of kinship bonds proved much stronger and more assuring than any political contract between these communities. Sentimental ties built through kinship networks worked as an adhesive to bind the socially autonomous groups together with emotional ties which could then only naturally lead to a feeling of loyalty to the Meitei king.

Instead of being made to feel that they were being ruled by the Ningthoujas, they felt naturally close and loyal to the Ningthouja king because he was their relative either through marriage or through blood, and not a mere political head. Amongst the inhabitants of the valley, he was a kinsman who was assigned the task of looking after

[6] We will discuss these two features in greater detail while discussing the kinship terms.

[7] Expanding the limits of possible alliance from preferential cross-cousin marriage can be seen as a stepping stone in the process of the formation of the composite Meitei state.

the people of the land who were his family and therefore was respected by the people; his fellow kinsmen.

The simple form of political order prevalent in the composite Meitei state was only an extension of the form prevalent in the individual salai structure. It was an extension of the meaning of the term 'family' to incorporate all the salais combined together. That is why it was only the genealogical ties that marked the status of each individual. Kinship was the measure to determine an individual's status in which both descent and affinity played equally important roles. Hence, the closer one was to the ruling line, the more he got exempted from state duties, and instead, acquired certain privileges. One thing that should be noted here is that the passage to get closer in kinship to the royal line was not closed. None of the marriageable women of the different salais were debarred from marrying into the royalty. Similarly, every capable man was an eligible candidate for the women in the royalty. The women marrying into the royalty were given the title 'Sija' and terms of address for her were similar to those for any woman of the royal household. The men were made nobles and were given the right to royal privileges. Hence, kinship had much to do with access to power and the path to power was not completely closed. This was another element that helped bring about the feeling of a family network rather than emphasizing the concept of the 'rulers' and the 'ruled.'

Kinship Terms

Broadly speaking the kin terms used in Meitei terminology can be divided according to the age and sex of the ego, of the person to whom the term is addressed to, and of the person through whom the addressee is related. Besides, the criteria of age and sex, descent also plays an important role, since it determines the choice of terms reserved for certain royal descendants. Further, the terms of address also distinguishes the affinal relatives from the consanguinal ones.[8] Affinals and the cross-cousins have the same forms of address which are markedly different from the terms used for their consanguine counterparts. Then there are those terms, which over a period of time, have acquired a generalized usage and have lost the literal meaning

[8] As mentioned earlier, certain kinship terminologies indicate the prevalence of a bilateral cross-cousin marriage system.

attached to them. These are used to show regard and respect and to make the addressee part of the ego's kin by evolving a fictitious kin network.

A table[9] of the kinship terms is given below for easy reference. The terms are with reference to the ego and a distinction has been placed between those terms addressed by a male ego and those addressed by a female ego, and those which are common in their use for both males and females.

KINSHIP TERMS FOR A MALE EGO

Kin Category	English equivalent	Terminology	
Elder Siblings			
B, FBS, MZS	Elder brother	Iyamba, Dada, Tada	
Z, FBD, MZD	Elder Sister	Iche	
FZS, MBS	Elder male cross-cousin	Ibai	(Also used for addressing B-in-law and Z-in-law).
FZS, MBD	Elder female cross-cousin	Iteima	
Younger Siblings			
B, MZS, FBS	Younger brother	Inao-Nupa	
Z, FBD, MZD	Younger sister	Ichan-Nupi	
FZS, MBS	Younger male cross-cousin	Isen	(Also used for addressing affinal categories)
FZD, MBD	Younger female cross-cousin	Inao Nupi	
Affines			
Wi	Wife	Nupi, Loinabi	
Elder affines			
WF, WFB	Father-in-law	Iku, Iku-Iman,	
WM	Mother-in-law	Ine, Inembok	

[9] Referred to from Pramodini N., *Social Grammar of Meiteilon*, unpublished Thesis, 1989 (See bibliography).

WiZ, BWi, FBSWi MZSWi	Sister-in-law	Iteima	
WiZH, FZDH, MBDH	Elder Brother	Dada, Tada	(used also in consanguinal relationships)
FZSWi, MBSWi	Sister	Iche	
WiB, ZH, FBDH, MZDH	Brother-in-law	Ibai	
Younger affines			
WiZ, BWi, FBSWi MZSWi	Sister-in-law	Inao-Nupi	
WiZH, FZDH, MBDH	Brother-in-law	Isen	
WiBWi, FZSWi, MBSW	Sister	Ichan-Nupi	
Children			
S, BS, MZSS, FBSS	Son	Icha-Nupa	
D, BD, MZSD, FBSD	Daughter	Icha Nupi	
ZS, FBDS, MZDS, FZDS, FZSS	Nephew	Imak, Imak-Nupa	
DH, BDH	Son-in-law	Iya-Nupa.	
ZD, FBDD, FZDD FZSD, MBSD, MZDD	Niece	Imou, Imou-Nupi	
SW, BSW	Daughter-in-law	Inao, Inao-Nupi.	

Note: Maternal and Paternal relations need not mean mother's side, father's side respectively, since they are divided on the basis of parallel and cross-cousins.

KINSHIP TERMS FOR A FEMALE EGO

Elder siblings			
B, FBS, MZS	Elder Brother	Ibung	
FZS, MBS	Elder male cross-cousin	Itei	(Also used for affinal relatives)
FZD, MBD	Elder Female cross-cousin	Innamma	
Younger siblings			
Br., FBS, MZS	Younger Brother	Ipwa	
S, FBD, MZD	Younger Male cross-cousin	Inao-Nupa	
FZD, MBD	Younger Female cross-cousin	Ichan-Nupi	
Affinal relatives			
Elders			
H	Husband	Iwa (Ipuroiba)	
HZ, BW, FBSW MZSW	Sister-in-law	Innamma	
HZH, FZDH, MBDH	Brother	Dada, Tada	
HB, ZH, FBDH, MZDH	Brother-in-law	Itei	
HBW, FZSW, MBSW	Elder sister	Iche	
Younger			
HZ, BW, FBSW, MZSW	Younger Sister-in-law	Ichan-Nupi	
HZH, FZDH, MBDH	Younger Brother	Ipwa-Nupa	
HB, ZH, FBDH, MZDH	Brother-in-law	Inao-Nupa	
HBW, FZSW, MBSW	Younger Sister	Inao-Nupi	

Children		
D, ZD, MZDD, FBDD	Daughter	Icha-Nupi
BS, FBSS, MZSS, FZSS, MZDS, MBSS, MBDS	Nephew	Iya
DH, BDH	Son-in-law	Iya
BD, FBSD, FZDD, FZSD, MZSD, MBSD, MBDD, MZSD	Niece	Imou
SW, ZSW	Daughter-in-law	Imou

COMMON KINSHIP TERMS

Parents' Generation:		
F, FB	Father	Ipa, Paji, Panthou, Pabung, Baba, Paba
M	Mother	Ima, Palem
FB, FFBS, FMZS, MFBDH	Elder paternal	Ipan
MZH, MMZDH, FFZDH	uncle	Pabunghan
FBW, FFZSW, FMZSW	Elder maternal	Imahan
MZ, MMZD, MFBD, MMZD	aunt	Imabok
FB, FFBS, FFZDH	Younger paternal	Khura, Kaka
FMZS, MFBDH, MSH	uncle	
FBW, FFBSW, FMZSW,	Younger maternal	Indon,
MZ, MMZD, MFDB, FFZD	aunt	Indomcha
FZ, FFBD, MBW, FFZSW, MFBSW, MMZSW, FMBSW, MFZSW	Paternal aunt	Ine

FZH, FFBDH, MB, FFZS, MFBS, MMZS, FMBBS, FMZDH, MFZDH, MMBDH	Maternal uncle	Mama/Mamo/Iman
Grand Children		
SS, BSS, BDS, ZDS, DS, MZSS, MBSS, MZDS, FZSS, FZDS	Grandson	Isu-Nupa
SD, DD, BSD, BDD, ZSD, ZDD, MZSD, MZDD, MBSD, MBDD, FBSD, FBDD, FZDD	Granddaughter	Isu-Nupi
Grand parents		
FF, FFB, MF, MFB, MMB, FMB, FFZH, FMZH, MMZH	Grandfather	Ipu
FM, MM, FMZ, FFZ, FFBW, FMBW, MFBW, MMBW, MMZ, MFZ	Grandmother	Ibok
Great grandchildren		
SSS/D,DSD/S, BDSS/D ZSSS/D, ZDSS/D, ZSDD/D, ZDDD/S	Great grand children	Suthan
Great Grandparents		
FFF, MFF, FFFB, MFFB, FMF, MMF, FMFB, FMMB	Great grandfather	Idhou/Ibudhou
MMM, FFM, FMM, MFM, FMMZ, FFMZ, MMMZ, MFMZ	Great grandmother	Iben dhou

The table of kin terms as given above are based upon the particular set of terms that each sex uses, as also, some terms that are commonly used by both. There are also some kin terms which are age specific and are equally important forms of address. The above table shows us that Meitei society can be seen as divided between those who are defined as parallel and cross-cousins. The terms define relations only up to the third generation indicating that their family unit comprises of upto only three generations.

The table below is a collection of those terms, used as forms of address that indicate the position of the addressee, according to his age, within the family structure of the ego. The terms used for women, are indicators of their position *vis-à-vis* the position of the men through whom they derive their relation. The basic distinctions are between the eldest, the middle one, and the youngest and the suffixes '*ahan*,' '*yaima*', and '*ton*'/'*macha*' signify the hierarchy between these.

Age set terminology	English equivalent
Pabunghan	'Eldest' father (father's eldest brother)
Pabung yaima	'Middle' father (Younger to the eldest, but older to father)
Pabungton	'Last' father (Youngest or younger, but generally not younger to father).

'Khura' is another term for the father's brother, and is used more generally as a specific reference term, its usage is more for the father's younger brother. Its usage was more prevalent in the pre-Hindu era.

'Kaka' is the term for the father's younger brother but is said to have been added with the influence of the Bengal School of Vaishnavism.

'Mama/Mamo' is again a term which has become part of Meitei terminology with the influence of the Bengal School of Vaishnavism. Earlier the term used was 'Iman'.

These terms follow a similar pattern in determining their hierarchy. So do terms like Ima, Ine, Ibai, Itei etc.

Descent is the third category according to which kinship terminology is determined. The royal titles, especially the titles used by kings,

were not supposed to refer to the commoners. The royal family within itself and the commoners, used it to address the royalty, emphasizing the attributes of its descent. This terminology was used for the Maharaj Kumars, the children of the ruling king, the Raj Kumars, the descendants of the royal family and the Leimas, the female descendants, and the Raj Kumaris of the royal family.

Kin Category	English equivalent	Common terms	Terms used by and for the royalty
1	2	3	4
M	Mother	Ima	Imasi/Imasi ja
FZ, FFBD, MBW, FFZSW, MFBSW, MMZSW, FMBSW MFZSW	Paternal aunt (younger)	Ine	Inemsi/Inesi ja
FBW, FFBSW, FMZSW, MZ, MMZD, FFZD	Maternal aunt (younger)	Indon, Indomacha	Indonsi/ Indonsi ja
Z, FBD, MZD	Sister (elder)	Iche	Ichemsi Ichemsi ja

While the terms 'Sija'/'Si' are attached to female royal terms, the word 'Sanakhwa' is attached to male royal terms.

Kin Category	English equivalent	Common terms	Terms used by and for the royalty
1	2	3	4
F, FB	Father	Ipa, Baba Pabung	Sanakhwa Pabungkhwa
FF, MF, FFB, FMB, MFB, MMB	Grandfather	Ipu	Sanakhwa-purel
B, FBS, MZS	Brother (elder)	Iyamba, Dada, Tada	Yambung
B, FBS, MZS	Brother (younger)	Ipwa/Inao	Ibungosana

As we see from the above table, descent forms the criterion which, through the use of a specific kin terminology, marks a distinction between the royalty and the rest of society.

The specific forms of address assigned to them, make for an immediate distinctiveness, as these assign the addressee higher social status. Women of the royal family acquire the prefix 'Sija' or 'Si' to the various terms addressed to them. Elder male members of the royal family acquire an additional world 'Sanakhwa' along with the usual terms reserved to address them. The person equivalent to the ego's elder brother acquires a totally different term 'Yambung'. These special honorific titles were conferred on the royal descendants of the Meitei kingdom perhaps to legitimize their rule over the composite Meitei state. These special terms immediately placed them as apart from the rest.

The Non-Kin Kins

Certain kin terms are also used for addressing non-kin. These terms are determined by linking an acquaintance or a friend, as a kinperson e.g., using the term Ima for a friend's mother or Pabung for a friend's father, which is not only considered polite but is also thought to be the proper term to address them.[10]

Friends

Friends form one of the closest social groupings in Meitei society. The terms of address are 'Itao' 'Itao-ibungo' (for a male ego) and 'Ita', 'Ita-ibema' (for a female ego). 'Marup' is a term commonly used by both the sexes. The word 'Mamanaba/Mamanabi', meaning equal, is used to define friends.

Morphology of the Kin Terms

In observing the kinship terms we find that the prefix 'I' is attached to most of them. It is derived from the word, 'ei', which means 'me'. So, when we say Ima, Iche, Iyamba, Ipa, Iku, etc., it means my mother, my sister, my brother, my father, my father-in-law, etc. The prefix. 'I' is pronounced as 'ee' which means blood. Emphasis on

[10] As stated earlier in this article, the whole society is bound by this fictitious kin network.

blood explicitly stated in the terminology indicates the assertion of kinship bonding. Blood is thus a symbolic representation to emphasize the concept of descent and the continuation of progeny through the mixing of blood with one's affines. 'Itei' is an affinal term including HB, ZH, FBDH and MZDH. Here the implied meaning is the smearing of blood over one's own. Hence, symbolically implying the mixing of two bloods. One of the terms used for wife is 'Itu', which is the combination of the prefix 'I', derived from 'ei'/'ee' (me/blood) and 'tu' in Meiteilon is a word describing the action of a wood-pecker pecking wood. The term then descriptively implies the sexual code as a principal relation with one's wife.

Descent in Meitei society is patrilineal. The genealogies do not mark the female progenies. The males trace their ancestry to the *Pibayanbi*, the head of the lineage. The son's son is a more talked about category. Females are only traced through their respective husbands.

One thing, however, is very important. Even though the society is clearly patrilineal, the kinship terms do not distinguish partrilineal relation from matrilineal ones, and, instead, differentiates between parallel and cross-cousins. Hence, the father's sister and the mother's brother are positioned in the same category, while the father's brother and the mother's sisters are collectively positioned in a different and opposite category. When someone is called a 'paternal' uncle (elder), it does not mean the father's brother, but also includes relations like the mother's sister's husband, mother's mother's sister's daughter's husband, father's mother's sister's son, father's father's brother's son, etc. Likewise, when the term 'maternal' uncle (elder) is used, it not only means the mother's brother, but also includes the father's sister's husband, the father's father's sister's son, and the mother's mother's sister's son.

In sibling relationships also the terminology used is markedly different for ego's parallel cousins and for cross-cousins. For a male ego the elder parallel male and female cousins are *Iyamba* and *Iche* respectively and the elder cross male and female cousins are *Ibai* and *Iteima* respectively. Similarly, for a female ego the elder parallel male and female cousins, are *Ibung* and *Iche* respectively and elder cross male and female cousins, are *Itei* and *Innamma* respectively.

This distinction between parallel and cross-cousins does not seem to be without reason, especially when we look into the affinal categories. It is here that we are able to establish a certain kind of

link. The terms used for ego's cross-cousin siblings are the same for addressing the affinal categories of the same generation. When a male ego addresses someone as 'Ibai', it may mean elder male cross-cousin, as well as, elder brother-in-law. Such forms of address are summarized in the tables below:

	Cross-Cousins		Affines
1.	Male cross-cousin	=	Brother-in-law
	FZS and MBS	=	WiB, ZH, FBDH, MZDH
	Ibai (for male ego)	=	*Ibai* (for male ego)
2.	Female cross-cousin	=	Sister-in-law
	FZD and MBD	=	WiZ, BWi, FBSWi, MZSWi
	Iteima (for male ego)	=	*Iteim*a (for male ego)
3.	Male cross-cousin	=	Brother-in-law
	FZS, MBS	=	HB, ZH, FBDH, MZDH
	Itei (for female ego)	=	*Itei* (for female ego)
4.	Female cross-cousin	=	Sister-in-law
	FZD, MBD	=	HZ, BWi, FBSWi, MZSWi
	Innamma (for female ego)		=*Innamm*a (for female ego)
5.	Maternal Uncle	=	Father-in-law
	FZH, FFBDH, MB, FFZS MFBS, MMZS, FMZDH,		
	MFZDH MMBDH	=	WiF, WiFB,/HF, HFB
	Mamo/Iku Iman	=	*Iku-Iman*
6.	Paternal aunt	=	Mother-in-law
	FZ, MBWi, MFBSWi,		
	FFZSWi	=	WiM, HM
	MFBSWi, MMZSWi	=	
	Ine	=	*Ine/Inembok*
7.	Nephew	=	Son-in-law
	BS, FBSS, MZSS, FZSS		
	MZDS, MBSS, MBDS	=	DH, BDH
	Iya	=	*Iya*
8.	Niece	=	Daughter-in-law
	BD, FBSD, FZDD,		
	FZSD, MZSD, MBSD,		
	MBDD, MZSD	=	SW, ZSW
	Imou	=	*Imou*

This kind of terminological distinction clearly indicates the prevalence of bilateral cross-cousin marriage in the Meitei kinship structure. Although in present times such marriages are not much in practice, their occurrence is not considered incestuous. Secondly, now-a-days one's immediate bilateral cross-cousins are, in some cases, held as similar to one's parallel cousins, while the extended bilateral cross-cousins seem to remain within the sphere of potential marriage partners.

The kinship terminology of Meitei society is then a clear embodiment of the distinction made between the marriageable and the non-marriageable groups/persons.[11]

This brings us to the major determining principles of incestuous categories. Which are the relations that are considered incestuous in Meitei practice? Yek is the Meitei term given to this age old category of prohibited relationships. It is this law that delineates the marriageable from the non-marriageable. According to this law, firstly, marriage within the same yumnak[12] is strictly prohibited. Secondly, marriage within the same salai is also prohibited. The second rule seems to be a recent addition to facilitate the merging of all the seven salais into the Meitei fold. This rule came to be so strictly adhered to that even when King Charairongba wanted to marry a woman belonging to his own salai, she and her family had to change their salai to avoid the prohibition (Refer to Chapter 3). Since then a precedence had been set that any male who wants to marry a girl from his own salai can and should first change to another salai.[13]

Thirdly, the Yek prohibition can be imposed on the marriage even when it is between different salais, in case the mother of the boy and the mother of the girl belong to the same salai. This kind of a prohibited relationship is called Sharuk Tinnaba. This rule places cross-cousins within marriageable limits since their mothers, as well as themselves, would belong to different salais. The children of mothers sharing a common salai are believed to be born out of the same womb, and hence are like real siblings. The kinship terminology

[11] Even the code of conduct is determined by which group of relations one is interacting with.

[12] Name/title used by a particular *sagei* (lineage).

[13] This is the reason why we sometimes see the same sagei names (Yumnaks) in more than one salai geneology. Since the person/family who has changed to another salai still retains the rest of the lineage in his privous salai.

supports this notion since the terms for addressing one's real siblings and parallel cousins are the same.

Age-set Terminology

The table delineating the age-set hierarchies in the Meitei kinship structure emphasizes the importance of denoting each generation in each relation by a specific term. Age in this case does not only denote the seniority in years but also seniority in terms of generations. For instance, if the father's brother is of the same age as that of the ego, the former would be called by the term specified for the father's generation and not the term by which ego addresses its siblings.

The second aspect which emerges from this table is with regard to the terms denoting seniority among mothers. It shows that in this society there exists a system of polygamy. It was found that a man may have more than one wife, but only the first wife is ritually married. The rest may be called his wives and addressed as mothers by his children but they are not ritually ordained wives. However, the children born to them possess legal, and ritual rights over their father and the sons from all the wives are all legally equal heirs to his property. There is, therefore, no concept of an 'illegitimate' child in Meitei society. For the children, the other mothers are also, conceptually, their own mothers, only senior or junior to their biological mother. The concept of their being other than one's own mother, does not seem to occur to the set of siblings. Consequently, the relationship between the step-siblings also emerges as a natural and 'biological' one.[14]

The Domestic Group

The household unit of the Meitei society called the Phunga, comprises of the ego and three generations above the ego. Ego's great-grandparents, grandparents, parents, and ego and his siblings. Theoretically, the Meitei system regards seven generations to be functionally significant. It is believed that the soul of the ancestor passes

[14] The widely prevalent concept of step-relations being wicked, scheming, etc., does not find much importance in Meitei folk traditions and popular notions.

through each generation for seven generations and thus completes the cycle. We can call the ego and the three generations above it a functional group since the rituals relating to ancestral worship (the Shraadha ceremony) are specifically ritualized for these three generations. Secondly; the set of terminologies prescribed, specify distinctively only these generations and not beyond them.

Sagei is a social group larger than the domestic group. It can be loosely defined as a lineage. It comprises of people sharing the same *yumnak* (family title). Each sagei has its own ancestor (the sagei *apokpa*), who is worshipped on assigned dates and has prescribed modes of worship. Its members share a feeling of brotherhood and feel an emotional bond of belonging.

Between the domestic group and the lineage group is another group which can be called 'the extended family'.[15] This is a group of relatives who are within reach of the pollution that is a result of the births and deaths of the members of this group. Although an emotional bondage exists within the domestic group, the physical need to be together is not very strong. A newly married couple may stay with the larger family for one or two years, but after that if they wish, they can move out and establish a separate unit. Such an event may not ideally be sanctioned but neither is it categorically disapproved of.

Inter-Personal Relationships

The relationships within a Meitei family seem to be strictly defined. This is explained by the fact that the term to define the norms is *niyam* which came from Bengal and means strictly laid down rules or *Chatnabi* which means 'traditions'. Deviating from the prescribed behaviour is considered as disobedience to the rules and anormative behaviour. It is categorically disapproved. The role allocation and the prescribed behaviour are specifically laid. The role allocated to mother, father or son etc. have specifically laid down principles and conduct. Anyone deviating from it is categorically disapproved of by the society.

[15] Our respondents could not give us a Meitei term for describing this particular group.

The Left and the Right

Women, in the household, as well as in public space, always stay on the left. Whether the left of the sitting arrangement in Lai-haroaba or generally the left side in the house, the left side in the bedroom, or towards the left in the bed. After the birth of a female child the placenta is buried on the left side of the house, while in the case of a male child, it is buried on the right side. The *chakhumka* (kitchen), a place exclusively used by the women of the household is also on the left. Even the household goddess Leimaren, being a female, is placed on the left side of the house, while Sanamahi, the male household deity, is placed on the right.

It is only during a marriage ceremony that the bride's party is seated on the right while that of the groom is on the left. Since the bride's family hosts the marriage ceremony, they are given a superior position. It is from here that one can derive the status assigned to women in this society. Left is also associated with impurity, defilement, death and inauspiciousness along with being the side prescribed for women. Right on the other hand is associated with purity, life and auspiciousness along with being the side prescribed for men. In addition the fact that polygamy is accepted, is another pointer to the status of women in this society. According to Maharaj Kumari Binodini, 'Polygamy is rampant a woman never likes to share her man, but here she is compelled to, and cannot do much to stop her husband.'

The situation seems ironical. In the economic sphere, the women of Manipur play independent roles. The traditional local markets (keithel) are run by the women. Men are outside the domain of the local keithels. Meitei women have been and still are a strong pressure group in the social and political spheres. The Meitei women even revolted against the British (refer to Chapter 7). Today, as meira paibis (torch-bearing women) they are a force to reckon with. Their crusade against drug abuse, alcoholism, human rights abuse and other social evils are noteworthy.

Yet in the domestic sphere, as well as, in the ritual sphere they are secondary to men.

Parent-child Relationships

Ancestor worship is the crux of Meitei belief and practice. Parents being one's immediate ancestors are considered superior and are

obeyed with respect. Disrespect shown to them, especially in public, leads to severe condemnation. The father is generally more highly regarded than the mother.

Intimacy between the parents and their children is not displayed. Children from a very young age are taught to obey. This is perhaps one of the reasons why the sibling bond becomes emotionally very strong. The walls built between the generations gives rise to distinctly separate generational groups standing in a vertical hierarchy to one other, with very little interaction.

As regards the relationship with the mother, the degree of intimacy is greater than that with the father, but is generally not shown in public, especially between the mother and the son. The mother and son relationship in public is considered with respect only when they are physically considerably apart. During the marriage ceremony, while the groom, as well as his mother are given seats of precedence adjacent to each other, they are distinctly separated by a partition between them.

The head of the Meitei family structure is the father. After the father's death it is not the mother but the eldest son who takes the role of the head. He is, in fact, called 'the ear to the father', i.e. inculcating the values prescribed by the father. Meitei philosophy also emphasizes this element. The head of the family, as well as the head of the state, should have one important characteristic, and that is to know one's father completely. It is only then that a family and the state can progress cohesively.

While the role of the children is to be obedient to their parents, the parents are in turn considered the sole protectors of their children. It is a popular belief that a child can only die when her/his parents are not around him. The evil spirits create either an urge for the mother to ease herself or anything to cause the parents to move away from the child so that it can enter in it and take the soul away. As long as parents are around, evil spirits can not touch the child.

This protection is symbolically represented by the phanek of the mother which she wears during the delivery of a particular child. Possession of that phanek by the child wards off the evil spirits. A small piece of that phanek is tied around the child's wrist. These phaneks are specially preserved by the mothers for the use by their children during journeys, later in life.[16]

[16] We observed some families where children wrapped their belongings in their mother's phanek (woman's lower garment) while venturing out of the house.

The Mother's Brother

Besides the parents, the mother's brother is also considered the protector of the children. This is symbolized in the rituals starting from the birth of the child till the child's marriage. On the sixth day after the child's birth, in the *Swasthi puja* ceremony, the mother's brother shoots arrows in all the four directions to ward off the evil spirit away from the new born child. If the new born child has a mark in between the eyebrows, he/she is considered to be in the grip of evil spirits. He/she is then symbolically 'sold' away to the mother's brother. Through this process he or she is considered 'cured'.

After the marriage ceremony the mother's brother takes the gifts given to his sister's daughter to her new home to arrange the things given to her, especially the bed. The sister's daughter is supposed to, in turn, specifically seek blessings from him after the ceremony before entering her married life.[17] Blessings from the mother's brother in general is considered a source of good fortune and quick recovery from any illness or pain. As a protector, the mother's brother is assigned a more important role than even the father. The father's brother, in contrast, has no ritual role in the life cycle of his brother's children.

The role of the protector assigned to the mother's brother in the family structure also extends to the level of the state structure. It was a popular belief that to protect himself and his reign, the king should trust only his mother's brother and his affinal relatives. In contrast the king's own brothers and his parallel cousins were believed to be a potential threat to his throne. The mother's brother was then not only perceived as the protector of his sister's children, but was also considered a force behind the stability of the state structure.

Avoidance Relationships

There are two sets of relationships within the family which have absolutely no interaction with each other. These are the relationships between the father-in-law and daughter-in-law and that between the husband's elder brother(s) including the parallel cousins, and the younger brother's wife, the younger brother's wife/daughter-in-law

[17] If we recall the concept of cross-cousin marriage we will realize that MB can also be the F-in-law of his ZD, therefore blessings from him also amount to seeking acceptance in her marital household.

should not be in the same room with the father-in-law/elder brother-in-law. They must exchange only necessary conversation and if their presence at the same time is inevitable, the daughter-in-law/sister-in-law should cover her head to show respect.[18]

The Husband–Wife Relationship

When a woman gets married, she brings along with her various things to set up a home. The ownership of these things is entirely hers. It is called *Awoonpot* and is not a dowry. She is not hindered from earning on her own and whatever she earns adds to her assets on which nobody else can claim ownership.[19] Besides the movable property given to her by her parents (awoonpot), she has no claim on their immovable property, the legal inheritance of which belongs to her brothers. Of course, this has changed due to the Hindu Succession Act, 1956 which is applicable in the State.

The husband inherits the immovable property. Thus in the new family unit, the husband brings in the immovable property while the wife brings in movable property. The ownership of the two types of properties is retained by each one separately.

The daughters, consequently, during their marriage inherit the movable property, while the sons inherit the immovable ones. Hence, it seems that the daughters inherit the mother's property, while the sons inherit the father's property.

The husband and the wife in their societal roles are perceived purely in terms of sexual codes, their main aim being to produce their offspring. They are the 'Pa' and 'Pi', the supreme male and female principles in the microcosm and are considered creators of their own universe.

Divorce or *Khainaba* is permissible and can be obtained without giving any specific reasons. The husband and the wife can separate without having to undergo any formalities. Re-union, later, is not

[18] She does not have to 'avoid' the husband's cross-cousins in a similar manner since she could possibly be their own Z who has married her cross-cousin. Even if this is not the case, norms of this kind have developed in which the husband's cross-cousins are 'treated' as brothers.

[19] We have seen women of different classes and different strata selling traditional clothes and vegetables in Ima Kaithel (women's market). It is not looked down upon. In fact women's self reliance is highly appreciated.

barred. The separated woman can always re-marry and claim back the awoonpot, her property.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter we extensively discussed how the Meitei kinship structure formed the basis of the unification of the Meitei state under the rule of the Ningthouja/Mangang kings. All the seven salais were brought together through the creation of salai exogamy and through the building of a web of affinal ties.

The age, sex, and descent categories determining the hierarchy in kinship terminology also facilitated the process of unification. The age factor justified the rule of the Ningthouja line, since it was portrayed as the oldest line since the first mythical king, Pakhangba, belonged to this salai. Patrilineality justified the passing of power from the father to the ablest son, and descent ascribed special status to the royalty and made them a class apart.

The structure of inter-personal relationships within the family also reflected the functioning of the state structure. The father in the family commands respect and it is prescribed that he perform all the rituals relating to the child's rites of passage. He is also the provider. Any show of intimacy between the father and his grown up children is absent in the family structure. Similarly, the king was the father of the state. His main task was to be the provider and ceremony conductor of all the rituals, for the betterment and welfare of the state. He was highly venerated but at the same time considered distinct and separate as the descendant of the divine.

The affinal relatives of the ego and the relations through the mother, especially the mother's brother, played the role of protectors and were therefore trusted the most. Similarly, the king too was advised to seek refuge in the protection of his affines and his mother's relatives.

In short, the state structure portrayed all the elements and the values of the Meitei family structure, and the family structure, in turn, was the microcosm of the state structure.

The copulation of the king and queen was believed to create generative power for their people, leading to the welfare of the whole state.[20] Copulation between the husband and the wife was believed

[20] This is extensively exemplified in the coronation ritual, which I have discussed in earlier chapters.

to bring out the generative power of the family. During this conjugal act, both the king and the queen and the husband and the wife were perceived as 'Pa' and 'Pi', the male and the female principles who were in the process of creating their own universe. Hence, the family, the state, and the cosmos formed one unit in the generation of the whole society. Kinship therefore, forms a base through which one can understand Meitei society in a composite manner.

The Polity

Recent Political History

Most people's talk of the emergence of a composite society, characterized by an organized and planned administration, dated this only from the time of King Garibniwaz, also known by the name of Pamheiba (AD 1709–1748).[1] The reason for remembering no further into the past than the time of Garibniwaz, could be, first of all, that this is not a very remote past, and is still fresh in the lore, not from personal anecdotes but repeated from the anecdotes passed down from their immediate forefathers. Secondly, Meitei society in Garibniwaz's time, underwent a dramatic upheaval when he adopted and enforced Hinduism as the state religion. For the first time in the history of Manipur a king had enforced an extreme measure, and the people of Manipur for the first time felt traumatized with the suppression and oppression exercised by their own king. He also changed the whole administrative structure, from a structure of federal units to complete centralized control, and the people who until then used to be nominated for different offices by the nobles, were removed, to give place to the relatives of the king.

These kinds of drastic political changes, accompanied by the imposition of a new religion, must have been events that could not be easily forgotten. It also marked the beginning of a whole new era, the Hindu era.

Garibniwaz was brought up without parental care in his childhood. He was unaware of the fact that he was King Charairongba's son.

[1] The sources for this period and subsequent periods, have been the stories told to me by my respondents, which they have remembered from what was told to them by their elders. I have also read the texts written by Meitei scholars who have seriously studied the past of their own society.

In a duel, he fatally injured the king. Ironically, Garibniwaz himself was also a victim of patricide, committed by his son, Ajit Sai.

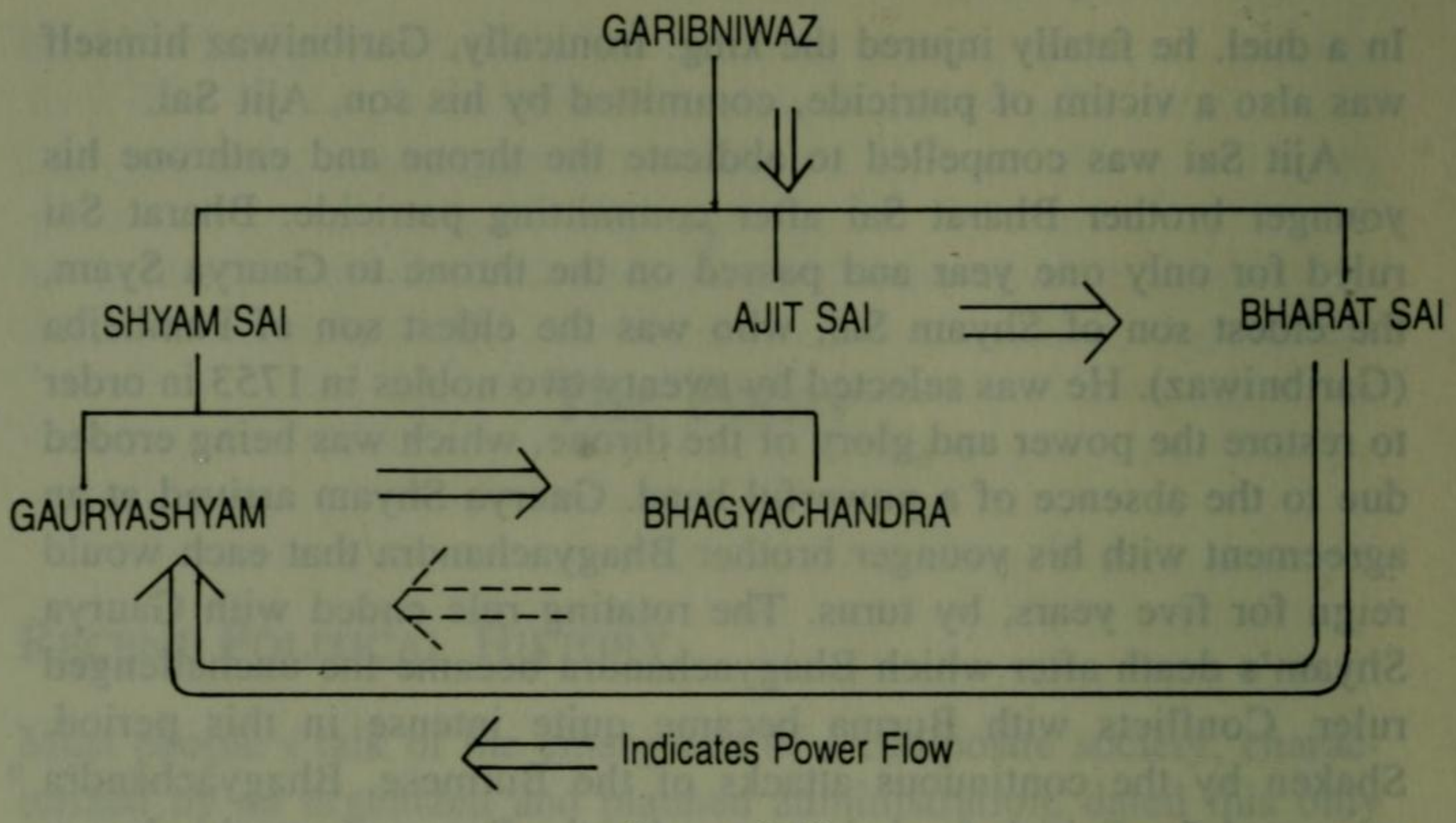
Ajit Sai was compelled to abdicate the throne and enthrone his younger brother Bharat Sai after committing patricide. Bharat Sai ruled for only one year and passed on the throne to Gaurya Syam, the eldest son of Shyam Sai, who was the eldest son of Pamheiba (Garibniwaz). He was selected by twenty two nobles in 1753 in order to restore the power and glory of the throne, which was being eroded due to the absence of a powerful head. Gaurya Shyam arrived at an agreement with his younger brother Bhagyachandra that each would reign for five years, by turns. The rotating rule ended with Gaurya Shyam's death after which Bhagyachandra became the unchallenged ruler. Conflicts with Burma became quite intense in this period. Shaken by the continuous attacks of the Burmese, Bhagyachandra requested the British for help to repulse the Burmese attacks. In exchange, the British sought rent free land of 8,000 square feet in Manipur to install a factory and construct a fort.

But, in spite of such upheavals in the state, myths portraying Bhagyachandra, as a great warrior as well as a devout believer in Krishna, were circulated widely and continue to be believed, till today. A divine power to be able to talk to Krishna, and his super human strength to tame even a wild elephant were some of the extraordinary qualities attributed to him. He was regarded as a 'true' king, with divine powers. A statue of King Bhagyachandra with his feet on a kneeling elephant installed at the centre of the market area of the state capital symbolizes his power and glory.

The title of *Lainingthou* (god king) was restored to him. If Garibniwaz was known for changing the state religion, and bringing in a centralized structure, Bhagyachandra came to be known as the pioneer of cultural renaissance who introduced the *Raaslila* and a completely new way of worship.[2] and firmly established Vaishnavism in Manipur.

The death of Bhagyachandra brought about political chaos in Manipur, interspersed with incidents of treachery and conspiracy

[2] Bhagyachandra firmly established the Gouriya branch of Vaishnavism of Bengal, which was then called the Goud Pradesh, in which Lord Krishna and Radha are the principal gods. Garibniwaz was more influenced by the Ramanandi Sect of Hinduism.



amongst his sons, who in a contest for supremacy also ended up fragmenting the loyalties of the people.

During this turmoil, Marjit, one of the sons of Bhagyachandra on being successful in capturing the throne, started asserting his power in the Kabaw Valley, which had been captured by the Burmese during the war with Bhagyachandra. The Burmese King Bagyidaw showed his displeasure and became furious when Marjit did not agree to go for his coronation. This Burmese king then attacked Manipur and established his rule for seven years which is referred to as '*Chahi Taret Khuntakpa*', which means the 'seven years' devastation', from 1819 to 1826. Marjit fled to Cachar, and realizing his mistakes reconciled with his brothers Chaurajit and Gambhir Singh, who had also fled. These three brothers then made an alliance and drove away Govind Chandra, the reigning ruler of Cachar, but were disunited once again in their attack against the Burmese. The Burmese, who were occupying the Manipur state at that time, continued their attacks on Cachar, but were defeated by Gambhir Singh. Gambhir Singh was then helped by the British in his attempt to recover Manipur from the Burmese. In 1825, the first political agent of the British, B.R. Pemberton, entered Manipur with Gambhir Singh and succeeded in driving out the Burmese from Manipur and also occupied the Kabaw Valley to the east of Manipur. In 1826, the Treaty of Yandaboo was signed, between the British and the Burmese in which Gambhir Singh was reinstated and recognized as the ruler of Manipur by both the

Burmese and the British. But, the fundamental feature of the treaty was that the boundaries of Manipur were redefined by an outsider, the British. Jiri and the western bank of the Barak Valley became the western boundary of Manipur, while Cachar was given up. The Kabaw Valley, which was the most fertile land of Manipur, was given over to Burma under the terms of the treaty. As compensation for giving up claims on the Kabaw Valley, the British agreed to pay 500 sikka per month to the king of Manipur.[3] From 1826 onwards, the British began meddling the affairs of Manipur.

Even though Gambhir Singh sought help from the British, his sovereignty was not compromised.[4] Although the British had started interfering with Manipur's relations with its neighbouring states during his reign, Gambhir Singh had complete control over the administration of the state and was able to formulate his own policies. He ruled Manipur for six years and worked toward restoring peace and progress of the state. He also extended help to the British to suppress the Khasi[5] uprising as he felt grateful towards them (the British) for having helped him fight the Burmese.

Gambhir Singh died on 9 January 1834. His infant son Chandrakirti was made the king, and was kept under the care of Nara Singh, the Senapati, who acted as the regent. Nara Singh is known to have conducted state affairs with great ability. But the widow of Gambhir Singh, Kumudini Devi, did not trust Nara Singh and tried to kill him with the help of Nara Singh's brother, in which attempt she failed. To save herself from possible retaliation by Nara Singh, she along with her son, Chandrakirti fled to Cachar.

Nara Singh was then recognized as the king by the British in 1844. He was later killed by Chandrakirti, who was then nineteen years old and who considered himself to be the rightful claimant to his father's throne. He tried to consolidate his position by making one of the sons of Nara Singh a *Yuvaraj* (crown prince) and the other son a Senapati. Initially, the British government did not recognize

[3] Mention of the Kabaw valley still evokes resentment and anger amongst the Meiteis toward the British and also the Union of India which after getting independence did not even try to retrieve the Kabaw valley from Burma.

[4] The relationship was considered to be equal since he helped the British as much as the British helped him. The picture of the British being colonial rulers was not clear till then.

[5] One of the dominant tribes in the state of Meghalaya.

him as the king and withheld the Kabaw Valley compensation. Angered by this, Chandrakirti sent troops and arms to help the Nagas who were fighting against the British in 1850. This immediately compelled the British to recognize him as the King of Manipur. After that the British also helped him several times to suppress the rebellions staged by different claimants to the throne. In return, Chandrakirti also helped the British to suppress the Nagas.[6] He sent his own sons, Surachandra, and Tikendrajit and his most courageous and loyal general, General Thangal to subdue the Nagas. The Nagas submitted to their authority and promised to obey the British. Apart from suppressing the Nagas, the Manipuri king with the help of these brave warriors, helped the British suppress many other rebellions. Because of this help rendered by Chandrakirti, the British, who had once refused to acknowledge him as king, regarded him as the ablest ruler and awarded him with various rewards. The king also reciprocated by giving gifts to the Viceroy of India, Lord Northbrook. The element of self esteem, became more visible during the reign of this king, where every assistance extended by the British was responded to by offering more assistance to them, in their time of need, and every reward by the British authorities to the king was treated as a gift, which was duly reciprocated. Tikendrajit and General Thangal were the two main inspirations who enabled the king to pursue the policy of an independent ruler, who ruled his kingdom with dignity. In 1885 the Anglo-Burmese war broke out between the British and the Burmese. The Maharaj sent a large contingent of troops under the leadership of Balram Singh, the *Awapurel* (the minister in charge of Burmese affairs). The British with the Maharaj's help defeated the Burmese. As a result, Burma came under the direct rule of the British. All went well until King Chandrakirti died leaving behind eight queens and ten sons—Surachandra, Pakasana, Kesarjit, Gopalsana, Kulachandra, Gandhar, Tikendrajit, Jhalakirti, Angousana and Jillangamba, in that order. His eldest son Surachandra became the king. But Chandrakirti had wanted all his sons to rule one by one in turn. And this wish led to great anarchy, during which different factions led by different royal descendants tried to overthrow the king at different points of time. This led to a weakening of the throne. Some of these rebellions were suppressed with the help of the British, but on some occasions the British refrained from rendering any kind of

[6] Again, the relationship was considered equal.

help, which lead to the estrangement of the British from the Manipuri king. Most of these threats were crushed by Tikendrajit, who was made the Senapati of the army.

Pakasana, the second son of Chandrakirti became jealous of the rising fame of Tikendrajit, who was also receiving the support of *Yuvaraj* (crown prince) Kulachandra. Pakasana influenced King Surachandra to take away judicial powers from the crown prince, and hand these over to him. He made King Surachandra ridicule his brothers Angousana and Jillangamba in the *Durbar.* Tikendrajit got infuriated with these machinations. One of the factors that influenced Pakasana's jealousy toward Tikendrajit was also because of his desire for a beautiful woman called Maipakpi, who was loyal to Tikendrajit. She co-operated with Tikendrajit throughout the power struggle.

The sons of Chandrakirti split into two groups, the first comprising of Pakasana, Kesarjit and Gopalsana, and the second comprising of Tikendrajit, Angousana, and Jillangamba, who also had the support of General Thangal, an old and revered warrior.

One day around midnight, Angousana and Jillangamba attacked their brother, King Surachandra, who than had to take refuge in the British Residency. After he failed to get unambiguous support from the British to regain his throne he expressed his desire to go to Vrindavan.[7] With his departure Kulachandra was made the king. He listened to Tikendrajit and did not give any importance to Pakasana. The British, by that time had realized the courage and aggressive nature of Tikendrajit and his unsympathetic attitude towards them. They considered him to be the real trouble maker for them and wanted to exile him. The Chief Commissioner of Assam, Mr. Quinton, was entrusted this responsibility. He reached Imphal and announced that a durbar would be held in the British Residency. This was completely against the norms, as a durbar could not be held unless called by the king, and it was only held in the palace. Inspite of that King Kulachandra, accompanied by General Thangal, went to the durbar called for at the British Residency. However, they were made to wait at the gates till evening, after which, feeling insulted, they returned to the palace. Tikendrajit had not gone. He had sent a message citing ill health as reason for not attending.

People whom I spoke to, thought that Tikendrajit must have come to know of his impending arrest, and hence made an excuse for not

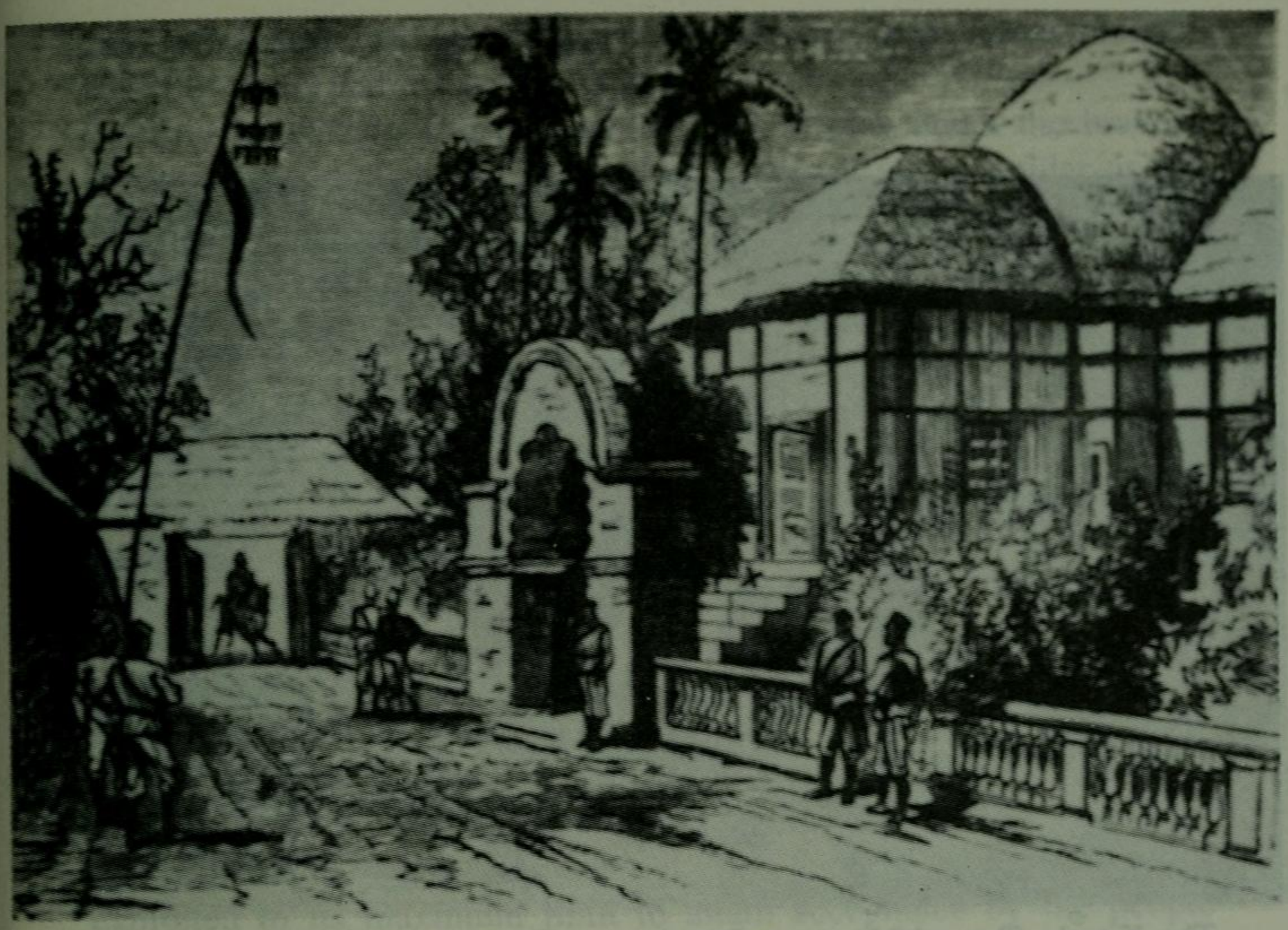
[7] A holy place for Vaishnavites in the State of Uttar Pradesh.

Western gate of Kangla during the reign of Maharaj Kulachandra in 1891. (From the collection of N. Khelchandra, Padmashree. Reproduced courtesy of the Manipur State Museum, Imphal.)

attending the durbar. He must have got a clue from the strange announcement about the durbar being held in the Residency, instead of the palace as was the practice.

When the durbar was announced for the second time, nobody, not even the king, obliged the British. Mr Quinton then sent the political agent Mr Grimwood to the palace at Kangla to deliver the message from the Government of India, asking Tikendrajit to attend the durbar being held at the Residency. Tikendrajit refused to attend.

The British then sent troops to forcibly take Tikendrajit to the Residency, but they were repulsed by Manipuri warriors after a violent clash between them, resulting in the death of children and women living inside Kangla. A second attempt was also made by the British to persuade Tikendrajit to go to the Residency. Mr Quinton, along with four of his officers including Grimwood, went to the palace, where they tried, in vain, to persuade Tikendrajit to attend the durbar at the Residency. And while Mr Quinton and his companion were leaving the palace, they were attacked by an enraged

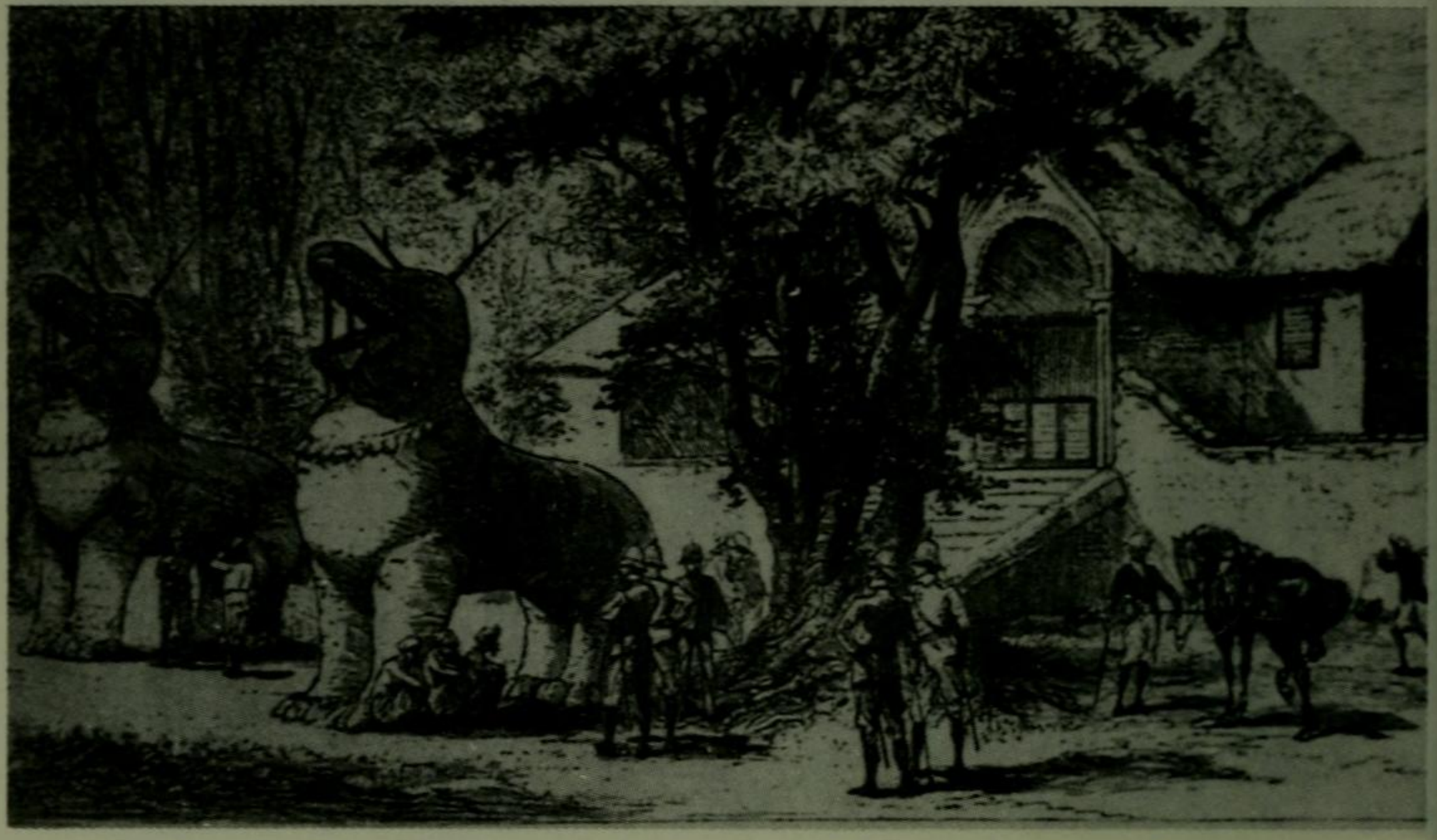


Durbar Hall, the spot marked X, where Mr Grimwood, the Political Agent, was speared by Kajao on the night of 24 March 1891
(From the collection of N. Khelchandra, Padmashree. Reproduced courtesy of the Manipur State Museum, Imphal.)

crowd who held them responsible for the death of innocent men, women and children. Grimwood was speared to death by one of them.[8] The other four were captured and were charged with the inhuman unprovoked murder of sleeping men, women, and children, and for having waged war against the crown prince (Tikendrajit) without any provocation. The Criminal Court sentenced them to death. The public executioner beheaded them in front of the two sculptures of *Kangla Sha*.[9] The people of Manipur attributed the killings to the will of the divine king.

[8] The people held the British Officers responsible for the death of innocent children and women in their earlier attempt to capture Tikendrajit by sending in troops in the Kangla.

[9] The mythical animal resembling a lion with two horns. It is now the official emblem of Manipur.



The Kangla Sha, which was referred to as Dragons by English writers, in front of which British officers were beheaded by the public executioner. (From the collection of N. Khelchandra, Padmashree. Reproduced courtesy of the Manipur State Museum, Imphal.)

This lead the British to send heavy reinforcements to Manipur with a strong artillery to crush the Manipuris. Cash rewards were announced for anyone who captured Tikendrajit and General Thangal. The British attacked Manipur from three sides, from Cachar, Kohima, and Burma. A fierce battle was fought at Khongjom (on the national highway to Burma) in 1891. Many of those who got killed in the fight against the British later became the great martyrs of Manipur. Tikendrajit and General Thangal were captured and hanged to death. Their names are still uttered with awe and admiration. Paona Brajabasi and Wagkhei Meiraba laid down their lives during the Khonjom battle. The martyrdom of Paona Brajabasi and the other heroes of Khongjom, on 23 April 1891, has been immortalized in *Khongjom Parva* (the narration of the Khongjom war of 1891 with the British) through the popular form of narrative singing. The centenary celebrations of this war took place in 1991 with great pomp

and enthusiasm and the courage of the mighty soldiers was remembered by each and every Manipuri[10].

'*Bir Tikendrajit*' (brave Tikendrajit) is a play about the bravery of Tikendrajit, which has been dramatized and is as popular as the Ramlila (story of Ram) in north India. It is enacted by various drama groups in various localities and is watched even today by packed houses, on 13th August every year, the day he was hanged along with General Thangal. This play is the enactment of the whole episode starting from the conflicts with Surachandra and ending with the hanging of Tikendrajit and General Thangal. It is enacted in a spirit of patriotism and pride. Tikendrajit, General Thangal, and Paona Brajabasi have become over time the ideal for every Manipuri, and a symbol of the struggle for self assertion.

What one notices in these historical events is that the concept of divinity and faith in kingship, had started eroding from the reign of Garibniwaz onward. Bhagyachandra was, in fact, the last king, who was thought to have divine power. Every proclamation made by him had been justified by arguing that it was derived from the dreams of the king that were divinely inspired. This concept of the dream was exploited to its maximum limit to attain acceptance by the people for the introduction of new ways of worshipping and dancing. His bravery was also cited in narrations of his dreams.

Garibniwaz, introduced the rule of primogeniture. The element of competition and endurance that used to be a decisive factor in coronation ceremonies lost its relevance since anybody who was the first son of the king was automatically declared the future king according to the rule of primogeniture.[11] This gave rise to various rebellions from those who considered themselves to be competent for the throne. Patricide which was earlier considered abominable, became a possible way to attain kingship. People who used to trust the king to first and foremost respect his ancestors and forefathers, since his coronation could only be successfully completed with the blessings of the progenitors, started feeling disillusioned. A tussle for the throne became the norm and the seat which had been venerated by the people as the core area responsible for imparting energy to society, became unsteady. After the British established their

[10] It was then that we recorded this recent history, which has become so popular that most of the people know it by heart, even though not all the details.

[11] Kingship became ascribed rather than achieved.

supremacy, the concept of the king as a ritual head lost its meaning and accession to the throne—*Phambal Kaba,* which used to be the principal state ritual, became a battleground for acquiring political supremacy devoid of any ritual elements.[12]

After the hanging of Tikendrajit, Manipur was annexed by the British and the throne was given to Churachand, the great grandson of Nara Singh and a distant relative of Gambhir Singh. He was only six years old. The British who were not until then actively involved in the politics of Manipur, asserted their complete authority over it after defeating the Manipuris in 1891. They declared their right to choose and nominate the king, along with extensive control over the administration of the state. The British chose Churachand as the king, side-lining the descendants of Gambhir Singh in the process, as they did not want anyone opposed to them anywhere near the throne. The political agent was given more powers in matters of administration and this was to continue until Churachand attained majority. Churachand became king and took over from the political agent in 1907 on attaining majority.

SANAD

The British government gave Churchand a *sanad*[13] which is reproduced herein:

> The Governor General in Council has been pleased to select you, Churachand, son of Chowbi Yaima, to be the Chief of the Manipur State, and you are hereby granted the title of Rajah of Manipur, and a salute of eleven guns.
>
> The Chiefship of the Manipur state and the title and salute will be hereditary in your family; and will descend in the direct line by primogeniture, provided that in each case the succesSon is approved by the Government of India.
>
> An annual tribute, the amount of which will be determined hereafter will be paid by you and your successors to the British Government.

[12] It was not that rituals were wiped out. The ritual enactments were of course carried out, but had lost their essence, first, because of Hinduism and later, because of infighting for supremacy over the throne.

[13] The *sanad* which meant a grant was notified on the 18 September, 1891, Simla, reproduced from C.U. Aitchison (compiled), *A Collection of Treaties Engagements and Sanads relating to India & Neighbouring countries,* Vol. II, Superintendent, Government Printing India, Calcutta, 1909.

Further you are informed that the permanence of the grant conveyed by this Sanad will depend on the ready fulfillment by you and your successors of all orders given by the British government with regard to the administration of your territories, the control of the hill tribes dependent upon Manipur, the composition of the armed forces of the state, and any other matters in which the British government may be pleased to intervene. Be assured that so long as your house is loyal to the crown and faithful to the conditions of this Sanad you and your successors will enjoy the favour and protection of the British government.[14]

H.M. Durand,
Secretary to the Government of India

Thus, after the British took over, kingship, which used to evoke feelings of awe and reverence in the Meitei people, lost its significance. It was reduced to a shadow of the past. However, the people did not lose respect for the king completely, who even in becoming a puppet in the hands of the British, was still their king. Even today, they bow down in the presence of the descendants of the last king, and continue to address him as *Sanakhwa,* a term that is reserved for the royalty.[15]

The Nobility and the Judicial System

In the mythical, and legendary periods, and to some extent, even in recent history, hierarchy in the Meitei social system was understood as a system of differences in descent. A person's genealogy played an important role in determining his status, his achievements, and fame.

In the immortal tale of Khamba and Thoibi, the legendary lovers of Moirang, Khamba and his sister Khamnu were not recognized by society at large or even by the Moirang Ningthou (king) as long as they were portrayed as 'poor' orphans. Being an orphan was considered the biggest misfortune for any person. But the moment Khamba started achieving fame, people traced his parentage and only then were able to explain his acts of bravery as signs of his royal pedigree.

[14] The Chief Commissioner of Assam was instructed to implement this treaty.

[15] Refer to Chapter 6.

Therefore, it used to be very important for a brave man to be a 'son of so and so'. If parentage did not signify royalty or superior class than any outstanding achievement was considered with suspicion.

King Bodhachandra was praised for the respect he showed for the traditional system of beliefs, and his tolerant attitude towards it, in contrast to the severe imposition of the Hindu faith, by his predecessors. His balanced approach was explained and 'justified' by citing the fact that he was a 'true' descendant of Pakhangba and Khagemba who used to respect their ancestors and their beliefs.

According to the system of hierarchy based on descent, the dominant ruling group comprised of the king and his council of ministers—*Ningthou Pongba Tara* comprising the chiefs of Angom, Luwang, Khuman and Moirang salais. Extensive work was done on the genealogies, so that the Meitei king along with the chiefs of other salais could trace themselves from one common ancestor. Hence, after great effort, all these salais were traced back to Atingkok, the supreme entity. This genealogy was based on the principle of fraternity, since all the salais were said to be descendants of a common parentage. This kind of kinship formation where all the salais were represented as being descendants from a common mythical parentage, was referred to as *Heiron* in the Meitei texts. It provided an image of Meitei brotherhood and equality among all the Meitei salais.[16]

According to some people, this kind of an image of fraternity was a mechanism by which the king and the ruling elite (Ningthou Pongba Tara) was able to rule over the common people, and it played a significant role in easing out possible sources of conflict between the rulers and the ruled.[17] Within the ruling elite itself, there was a strong sense of fraternity. Kingship was not supposed to a one man show.

The power and function of the king used to depend a lot on his personality, his might as a warrior, and also to some extent his physical appearance.[18]

There was a convention according to which all new proposals were to be placed before Ningthou Pongba Tara, for consideration

[16] See grand genealogy in Chapter 6.

[17] In fact, this custom must have been practised throughout the history of the Meiteis, in bringing the several autonomous communities into the fabric of the larger Meitei body politic, having at its apex, the ruling elite in its hierarchical arrangement of social organization.

[18] One old man told me that a fat man could never become the king, since being fat is associated with laziness.

and acceptance. The king consulted his nobles every twenty days, and could force his will, as long as he did not go against the social customs and conventions.

The Ningthou Pongba Tara (the nobles) were also called *Ipu* (grandfather), and had adjectives attached to them: like *Ningthou Ngamba Angamba* (old men with great knowledge and power over the king). Their posts were not hereditary, but were decided through appointments by the king, from amongst the thirty two *phamdons* (divisions). They were more popular with the people than the king himself, since he was considered partly mythical (divine), partly human, and also mystical, and hence inaccessible. The Ningthou *Pongba Tara,* were also named *Leiching Purel* (one who pulled the people). These informal forms of address especially 'Ipu', which was very popular, also brought them in touch with the common people, in terms of a broad kin framework.

Cheirap, was and is the name given to the judicial institution, the court. Angom Ningthou was the chief of this court, which had a strength of sixty four members. These sixty-four phamdons, as they were called, were nominated from thirty two administrative divisions; two people from each division. They were entrusted to judge crimes relating to both civil and criminal cases. But they could inflict at the most only a sentence of two years rigorous imprisonment and a fine of five hundred rupees. The king had the unconditional power to prevent any of the sixty four members from sitting in the *Cheirap* at any point of time.

The village court was the smallest unit of administration consisting of the headman and the village elders. It applied the methods of persuasion and conciliation to resolve conflicts. In fact, this unit was a kind of an extended family network where mutual compromise was the main method for conflict resolution.

The office of the *Pundit Loishang* functioned as a custodian of convention and customs, while that of the *Chatlam Lutin* as that of the state. Pundit Loishang resolved religious disputes, and dealt with the legal questions concerning religious doctrines and philosophy. The people occupying this office were trained and knowledgeable maibas, who were addressed by the people as *maichaos* (scholars). They also judged cases related to traditional family law. The maibas who constituted this office were placed in a hierarchy. At the top was Pundit Achouba, who was responsible for the Kangla Laiharaoba, below him was Pundit Yaima, then there were four Maiba Hanjabas

and the lowest in the hierarchy were the Hidang Hanjaba. All these maibas were also assigned the task of recording and compiling the events of the state in the royal chronicle called the *Cheitharol Kumbaba*. If one goes through this chronicle, one is amazed at the kind of details that have been incorporated.

When Hinduism was established, most of the Meitei scriptures were burnt down and destroyed, including the *Cheitharol Kumbaba* during the reign of Garibniwaz. The *Cheitharol Kumbaba* is said to have been rewritten by the office of Pundit Loishang. Hence one can't help being surprised at the extent to which even the most minute details of the lives of the kings have been reconstructed.

I was told that the royal chronicle had been re-written many times over because of constant attempts made by Brahmin priests to destroy it. Many people said that it was because of this that they had lost faith in the authenticity of the present version. According to some people, it was due to these factors that the chronicle had undergone modification and some anecdotes had been completely changed, after the Brahmins invaded the jurisdiction of the office of Pundit Loishang and attempted to reinterpret history by giving it a Hindu base.

The Brahmins had their own office instituted by King Garibniwaz which was called the *Brahma Sabha,* which was responsible for managing the affairs of the Gobindajee temple and all the other temples of Hindu gods. It was set-up as the highest authority in religious matters.

Pacha was a court for women, whose head used to be the Maharani[19] It tried cases involving women. And the accused were subjected to only one form of punishment. Her breasts were uncovered and black paint was smeared all around that part of the body and on the face. A rope was tied to her waist with a stick on the other end of the rope. She was paraded in the whole bazaar area, with a man walking in front of her announcing her crime.

The king was the commander-in-chief, and chief of the military court, where trials of military personnel were conducted. The king, did not personally attend the trial, but received reports through his messengers posted there. Once the accused was convicted by this court, the king did not have any power to pardon him. Even members of the royalty were under its jurisdiction, although the severest form

[19] The senior most queen of the king.

of punishment inflicted upon them was banishment from the kingdom. They were spared from capital punishment.

The *Durbar* was the policy making institution, where the scholarly minds of *Ningthou Pongba Tara* collectively were constantly at work.

Such a decentralized structure of administration, became a completely centralized structure during the reign of Garibniwaz. The Maharaja became the focal point from whom all power emanated. He became the most important figure in the entire set-up. The sixty four phamdons[20] lost their power. All the sons and relatives of the king were appointed to royal posts.

However, it is highly ironic that just when the system was decentralized, the king was elevated to the position of a super-natural being, having divine qualities. He was *Lainingthou* (god-king), the originator of all human beings, the creator. But, even then, succession to the throne was not based merely on the principle of primogeniture. One had to prove one's capacity to become a king. However, as the structure started shifting towards the centre and the king became the sole authority, the mysticism and the charisma of kingship started to fade away. Garibniwaz's attempts to make himself an incarnation of God Vishnu, rather than Pakhangba, failed miserably. In changing the whole world-view of the people, by shifting their origin from Atingkok to Lord Vishnu, from Sanamahi to Surya Devata (sun-god), and from Pakhangba to Anantanag meant a complete overhaul in their understanding of their world. It however could not replace Meitei belief in the ancient story of their genesis.

Kingship lost its hold over people who until then had considered themselves to be king- makers. Increasing feuds among the sons of the king for the throne made kingship an entirely mundane issue in which people became less involved. Gradually it became a family affair. The involvement with state politics got confined within the corridors of the royal household. Pomp and ceremony became mere formal signs which had earlier formed the very essence of the Meitei belief system.

Any king who occupied the throne after such feuds could not acquire the stature of a supernatural being, since no divine entity would have needed to snatch the throne or be afraid of it being taken away from him. From a divinely ordained ritual head the kings were reduced to mere political heads who were not sure of their own

[20] Heads of the thirty-two administrative units.

future. This political transformation gradually eroded the edifice of the society that used to be based on ritual elements.

It was during these turmoils that people like Tikendrajit, General Thangal, Paona Brajabasi rose to glory and became immediate symbols of heroism and adulation for the desperate masses.[21] None of them were kings. They however represented heroism, gallantry and patriotism of the highest order. They enjoyed, and still do, enjoy immense popularity among the common people.[22]

The Heroes

Tikendrajit was the crown prince and a son of King Chandrakirti. He was also the chief of the army. Thangal was a very old man, who had been serving as a general in the army since the time of King Gambhir Singh. Paona Brajabasi was a major in the army. They all showed exemplary courage while fighting the British. This was the time when the kings were fleeing in the face of grave danger, to save their own lives or becoming subservient to the British. In the minds of the people, this kind of cowardice was never a part of the Meitei tradition which was replete with exemplary anecdotes of bravery. It was in such circumstances that Tikendrajit and others became a symbol of courage and pride in being Manipuri. The people of Manipur made Tikendrajit a legendary figure and also attributed divine qualities to him. He was believed to have the capacity to fly in the air, to grow in size, to vanish from the battlefield, and to jump great heights. How else could they describe his bravery? Paona Brajabasi could foretell the strategies of British attack and hence was able to prepare his army well in advance. The people of Manipur proudly assert that the British soldiers used to tremble in fear at the sight of Paona Brajabasi and that they even tried to win him over to their side.

It is said that when Tikendrajit was eight years old, he was uncontrollable and fearless. It was said that one day he quietly went up to the top of the Gobindajee temple and ran on the parapet. After

[21] They had bravely defied the authority of the alien forces and maintained as well as asserted their right to govern their own state and showed pride in being Manipuris.

[22] They are the main heroes who are remembered every year on the Khongjom war day.

coming down a few steps he saw his father Chandrakirti coming toward the temple. He jumped out from the window from a height of about fifteen feet and ran away. At the age of eighteen he got involved in a local fight with the champion of *Mukna* to test his strength.[23] He caught many tigers alive. He exercised regularly with swords and spears. He also used to jump across the six feet high temple gate.

Mrs Grimwood, wife of the British political agent stationed at Imphal, wrote a descriptive account of him—'he was not a striking person, about 5 feet 8 inches in height with a relatively lighter skin. He had nice eyes and a good smile. It was nice to see him play polo.'

The widow of Tikendrajit described him as a very attractive person especially in the Yuvaraj's dress, that is, a silk dhoti, kurta, *koyet phiyet,*[24] silk *chaadar*, and silk slippers. His eyes were sensitive, and, he used to look quite graceful. There used to be a belief that the Yuvaraj could disappear for some moments and then reappear.

He was a keen student of traditional texts and took regular lessons from Pundit Loishang. He could speak both Bengali and Hindi fluently and also learnt the Hindu scriptures.[25]

He fought and died for the preservation of the kingdom's integrity and its culture. He was General Thangal's favourite prince. He is known to have expressed his views against the decoration of his father by the British.

The stand taken by the Yuvaraj and his consequent martyrdom has been a source of inspiration for the revolutionaries of East India including Bengal during the fight against the British, as well as, during recent movements for self assertion, that propose that the fight for the motherland and for self pride has not yet ended.[26]

Thangal, by comparison, was an old, brave, stable, and shrewd warrior. He had also studied thoroughly the geography of the state which enabled him to be aware of the actual territorial boundary of

[23] Meitei form of wrestling.

[24] A royal turban.

[25] Learning English was not considered good, since that would imply copying the style of the 'Mlechcha', the British.

[26] Some are of the view that before the British annexed Manipur it was an independent principality. In 1947 when the British left, Manipur was formally acceded to the Indian Union in 1949. This accession according to them was not voluntary but by coercion and therefore considered to be an act of grave injustice.

Manipur. In the survey made by the British after the signing of the treaty of Yandaboo, they were suspected of having given away large areas of Manipur.

After Manipur was taken over by the British on 27th April, 1891, Thangal General, who was eighty five years of age was captured on 7th May, 1891. The British, not only sentenced him to capital punishment but also confiscated his assets and sold them in an auction.

'Comrade' Irabot, was the *Mamak Ibungo* (royal son-in-law). He married King Churachand's daughter. Inspite of that he continued working as a humble school teacher in an upper primary school. Later he became a member of the Sadar Panchayat.

He rose in eminence when he revolted against the traditional custom which enabled a king to ex-communicate any individual or group if they incurred his displeasure. It became scandalous especially since it came from the king's own son-in-law. The king could not take any punitive action against him because of their relation.[27] He tried to divert him from his view, and made him the President of the *Nikhil* Manipur Hindu Mahasabha (it had nothing to do with the All India Hindu Mahasabha). This provided another opportunity for Irabot to express his views. He spoke of equality from this platform and changed its name to the Nikhil Manipur Sabha—inviting non-Hindus also to join this organization. It was on the strength of this organizational base that he rose against the British, soon after which the king[28] declared this organization unlawful and ex-communicated him. The organization underwent a radical change, and Irabot emerged from it as a fierce freedom fighter. He changed the organization's name again to the 'Manipur State Congress', that was to fight two fronts at the same time—the British and the Manipuri monarchy. He started editing the publication, *Anouba Jug* (New Age, this was the local version of the organ of the Communist Party of India). He is remembered today with as much reverence as Tikendrajit and General Thangal. He was the first person to propagate the communist ideology in Manipur and is regarded as a pioneer of the communist movement in the state.

[27] The affinal codes of conduct were difficult to break even by the king. See Chapter 6.

[28] The king was a puppet in the hands of the British.

THE ECONOMY

The ideal socio-economic state according to the Meiteis is 'watta padaba'. The literal meaning of this expression is to neither have a shortage and nor an excess of the requirements of life. The same is applicable to their philosophy of life. They neither advocate a life of indulgence nor that of strict asceticism.

Most of the people even today, are engaged in agriculture. During the king's reign, land was divided into revenue leviable and revenue free lands for revenue collection. The revenue free lands were the *Ningthem Lou*, the land used by the king; *Lairou*, land for the maintenance of deities, and *Lugun Lou,* the lands gifted to Brahmins and to the king's' favourites; these lands were given back to the king after the death of the person who had been gifted the same.

In the case of revenue payable lands, the beneficiaries had to pay a tax in kind, a quantity of rice and in the form of lallup services, for ten days out of every forty. The king appointed a revenue officer called Lourung Purel Achouba. The headman of every village helped him collect revenue.

Spinning and weaving were essential qualifications for all Manipuri women. The material that they used was either cotton or *mugha* (silk).

The silk industry was introduced by the Chinese settlers in Manipur in the thirteenth century.

As mentioned in earlier chapters, many of the sageis got their names from the occupation they were assigned. There was no hierarchy involved in this system of job allocation and nor was it completely binding on any individual of the sagei, unlike the caste system. Giving names according to one's profession was an easy way to group people. Hence, for example *Thangjam* worked as blacksmiths, *Sanasabum* and *Konsam* worked as goldsmiths. *Ayekpam* painted and *Aheibam* specialized in brass work.

Salt was a very rare commodity in this area. The king controlled the salt mines. It was used by the Meitei kings to put pressure on the hill people and others who had to depend on the Meitei kings for it.

The traditional economy of the Manipur state was based on its water sources. A number of water sources such as Pumshakhong, Marong-Khong, Nungcheng, Kha-Khong, Laikhong, etc., were also described as the abode of divine beings. These water sources were

believed to be central features in the creation myth of the Meitei people.

Mongba-Meirongba was a sacred pond, that is thought to exist even today in Kangla, and is known as the *naopham* (placenta)[29] from where Nongda Lairen Pakhangba, the first mythical king, is supposed to have originated.

The political head of the state controlled the main sources of water. Irrigation canals were dug to channelize streams and rivers which gave rise to fertile cultivable lands, and the growth of human settlements for cultivation and cattle-rearing.

Water was one of the main causes for disputes between the three powerful groups, the Mangang, the Luwang, and the Angom. One of the water sources, according to myth, had assumed the shape of three pieces of stone called Nungkhong Nunglaobi. This water source, considered the ultimate source of water, is still worshiped during times of drought, after which, it is believed, it rains immediately.

Since Meitei society was traditionally an agricultural society water was an important economic base of society. The valley is dotted with many lakes criss-crossed by numerous rivers and streams. These lakes and rivers have traditionally been the source of economic sustenance. Loktak is the largest fresh water lake covering an area of about 55 sq. km. The Moirang and Khuman principalities had been established around Loktak and surrounding lakes. The myths and legends of these two principalities have been inextricably linked with Loktak.

These lakes provided a constant source of edible plants and fruits apart from abundant fishes. The numerous rivers and streams provided a means of transportation of goods/commodities among various principalities.

Water plays an important part in the fertility cult of the Meities, as the souls of the supreme *pa* and *pi* are invoked during the rituals, and it is here that the creation of human beings is considered to have taken place.

The importance of water in the socio-economic life of the people of this state is further emphasized by the fact that the nodal point of water source which is believed to be the source of water streams is the seat of the supreme authority, the throne of Pakhangba.[30]

[29] A source of energy.

[30] 'However moral and individualistic a religion may become, it never completely loses its original character of seeking after worldly and public

The state had a self sufficient economy with cultivable land available to everybody. Every woman knew how to weave and the houses were constructed from locally available materials by the collective labour of the villagers. Since population was scarce there was enough land for everybody. The base of this self-sufficiency was however shaken with the coming of the British. Maharaj Churachand Singh who was coronated by the British on his attaining adulthood, abolished the age-old tyrannical system of *Lallup*.[31] When the people, revolting against the British rule, had burnt the house of the Assistant Superintendent in 1903, the Political Agent, Lt. Col. Maxwell, in order 'to teach a lesson' to the Meiteis, in 1904 ordered that the people of Imphal should supply teak-wood from the Kabaw Valley and reconstruct the house of the Assistant Superintendent. The people read in this order an attempt to revive the tradition of forced labour which their king had abolished. They did not take this calmly and this led to a major outbreak of violence, which was mainly spurred by the women of the state. The women entered the Residency. The military was requisitioned to control the situation but failed miserably. The British were compelled to withdraw their order which had aimed at reintroducing the system of Lallup. The women's movement came to be known as *Nupilal* and it marked the first organized people's protest movement against British authority.

The women of Manipur created an uproar again in 1939 against the decision to export rice, which had resulted in an acute shortage of the same in their own state. This was called the second *Nupilal* movement. Export of rice began after Manipur came under British control. In 1939 the harvest was not satisfactory. Due to this the Durbar initially prohibited the export of rice but later revoked this decision, in order to earn revenue. The price of rice went up and people did not have enough even for domestic consumption. Women,

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prosperity. The king is responsible for the crops; he must keep them supplied with rain, or in default of rain, with running water', (A.M. Hocart, *Kings and Councilors*, Rodney Needham (ed.), University of Chicago Press, 1970, p. 217.

[31] During the rule of the Maharajas, there was the system of Lallup (forced labour). According to this the Meiteis were divided into six pannas. All the male members of the pana above the age of 16 had to render compulsory labour to the state for ten days for every forty days, free of charge, and if for any reason, one could not render service, he should provide a substitute. (Refer Chapter 3).

who had been playing a significant role in the sphere of domestic trade and commerce, felt the gravity of the situation and gheraoed the British Residency demanding a prohibition on export. A contingent of the Assam Rifles force had to be summoned to rescue the British administrators by use of force.

Though export of rice was the issue around which the second *Nupilal* movement took place, it finally led to the growth of anti-British feelings. They did not blame their king, since they knew that he was a mere pawn in the hands of the British. Finally, the king was forced to issue orders prohibiting the export of rice, but the spirit of nationalism had been kindled and could not be suppressed.

The women sell goods ranging from fish, rice, vegetables, jute products, fruits, flowers to things specifically meant as offering to the *Lai* (gods); traditional Manipuri clothes—phi, phanek, khudei, chaddar, etc., spun and woven with their own hands in their looms. The art of weaving has been traditionally associated with womanhood[32]. In the legendary tale of Khamba and Thoibi, there are detailed descriptions of how Thoibi, even though a princess[33], used to weave on her loom. Her fame as an outstanding weaver spread far and wide. In fact, she wove all the dresses and materials that were later used for her marriage. The setting for all the romantic exchanges between Khamba and Thoibi was provided by the loom where Thoibi used to weave while Khamba sat on a stool waiting for her eyes to meet his, while Thoibi's mother hiding behind the curtain looked at Khamba approvingly.[34]

A loom is generally found at the corner outside nearly every house. Women, of all classes, in their spare time still weave their own and the family's garments. They also weave for sale in the market, as well as to other families. Economic necessity was not always the main criterion for the development of such a household industry.[35] It was a method of socialization, a hobby and a part time occupation for earning extra income. Sitting in the market was not

[32] Even today during the marriage ceremony among the *awoonpot* brought by the bride, the embroidered and woven articles made by the bride are specifically displayed to receive appreciation from the people.

[33] She was treated as a princess by the king of Moirang, who was her uncle. The king of Moirang was issueless.

[34] This scene is still a favourite theme among the artists/painters of this state.

[35] It has been observed that among the women sitting in the market area, many are bedecked with a lot of gold jewellery.

at all looked down upon.[36] Dignity of labour of such magnitude can be marked as a unique feature of this economy.

While old or middle aged women dominate trade in local goods and products, the goods that need to be brought from outside Manipur are in the hands of the Mayangs mainly constituted by the Marwaris and the Punjabis. During the period of 1951–61, Manipur witnessed a sharp increase in the population of the trading community which came from outside the state. There was an increase of about 46% among the Sikhs and 48.16% among the Jains mainly through immigration. They probably saw a promising market in the state for the products of other regions. Though the interaction between Manipur and the rest of India increased, it was restricted to trade and commerce only without much of cultural interaction. Though the economy of the Manipur state, even today is based on the principle of self-sufficiency, due to the logic of the developmental process, with population growth and the rise of consumerism, the trade and commerce of the state has slowly come under the control of these trading communities. The present day educated youth of the state do not want to continue with the occupation of their forefathers, yet at the same time there are no other alternative economic avenues since even in the modern job market, the tertiary sector predominates in this society. There are only a few big factories, like the Hundung cement factory, the spinning mill and the Vanaspati factory, which also never run to their full capacity. The small scale industries are working with full functional utilization, but cannot fulfil the demands of the modern era, i.e., for modern amenities and modern ways of life, with the result that only the government service is able to provide financial security. The government thus keeps paying salaries without earning any expanding revenues. There have been occasions when the state government has been almost reduced to bankruptcy and has not been able to pay even wages to its employees. A constant inflow of funds from the central government has therefore been inevitable. But this in turn has also caused a lot of resentment among the people of this state as it undermines their self-esteem. The fact that their

[36] Incidentally, I observed an old woman sitting on the road side selling pakoras (fried gram flour stuffed with vegetables). After sometime a young man in his scooter came to pick her up. I was told that the person was her son and that they own quite a big house nearby. The woman used to get bored, so she started doing this.

state which had once been self-sufficient, has now become totally dependent on 'outside' forces, makes most Meitei angry. There are very few jobs available with the security of a 'government job' for those who want to be doctors, engineers, or civil servants. Being a government servant is like a dream fulfilled. The lack of employment opportunities and the existence of a large percentage of unemployed educated youth has thrown up serious social crises in contemporary Manipuri society. Corruption is rampant, with each public post available at a price tag. It is in this context that Manipur is witnessing an increase in insurgency movements. The problems of unemployment, corruption, lack of infrastructural facilities, bankruptcy of political leadership and heavy reliance on the central fund have all broken the self-esteem of the people. They blame and hold the centre responsible for neglect, ignorance and high-handedness. The centre instead of understanding the peculiar problems of insurgency in the area is resorting to strong arm tactics, invoking stringent laws like the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958 etc. There have been serious violations of human rights by the security forces as a consequence. The feeling of resentment has only further fuelled separatist tendencies.

Given the absence of modern industries, the traditional sectors of the economy though inadequate, are still intact and relevant. A modern industrial economy is still to gain a foothold in Manipuri society. The significance of seed sowing festivals, the celebration of first fruits, the tracing of growth and prosperity to copulation rites are still considered important aspects of the economic life of Manipuri society. But these features are also fast loosing their essence since the urge to modernize felt by the educated youth and the absence of avenues to do so is leading to a disbelief in such rituals.

Culture as a Process

Nari Rustomji[37], advisor to the Governor of Assam in 1950, recalled in his book, *Enchanted Frontiers*, that the then Maharaja of Manipur tried to adhere to the status quo when the question of merger of his state with the Dominion of India came up. According to him 'the Maharaja of Manipur was regarded by the Manipuris as a divine

[37]Nari Rustomji, *Enchanted Frontiers,* Oxford University Press, Calcutta, 1973, pg. 107.

incarnation and enjoyed a special position in state rituals of the state.'[38] This remark made by an observer, who was an inhabitant of Manipur in the 1950s points to the importance attached to rituals, and the perception of the king as the head of these rituals. This perception of the king takes us back to similar, earlier perceptions and makes us see that history has not altered this very much. The king's role in state rituals had always been an essential element of state politics.

When we study culture as a process we invariably notice the continuance of such perceptions and concepts, which is not to say that culture is static. Although the same cultural categories continue over a period of time, on close observation we can see that they undergo modification through situational adaptations, which may be because of ecological, historical, or political factors or all these together. Nevertheless, the basic structure remains more or less the same. The culture of the society cements together these various cultural forms. In other words the basic tenets of the culture remain the same, only the forms adapt or may take different shapes according to various situations mentioned above.

A culture of dissent directed towards the authority *per se*, when seen from the above mentioned perspective, can be traced to the stage when the Meitei state was witness to penetration by foreign elements into its state structure, and into its cultural ethos. We have seen in earlier chapters how the invasion of Hinduism into Meitei society was faced with severe critical reactions from the priests/custodians of the traditional faith. The period of British imperial rule was marked by the rise of Meitei cultural heroes and bloody confrontations leading to the 1891 conflict. The Nupilal movements kept up that tradition. The independence of India and the merger of the Manipur State with India under controversial circumstances did not usher in a new and vibrant era. The manner in which Manipur was merged with India later became one of the main planks of sustenance for the insurgency movement in the valley of the state.

In the year 1950[39], when the Governor of Assam, Sri Prakasa and his advisor met Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel, the first home minister

[38] Surjit Sinha (ed.) *Tribal Polities and State System in Pre-Colonial Eastern and North-Eastern India,* Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, K.P. Bagchi & Co., Calcutta 1987.

[39] Nari Rustomji *Enchanted Frontiers,* Calcutta, 1973, pg. 109.

of independent India, they explained the difficulties regarding the merger of Manipur. Patel in turn asked if there was no Brigadier of the Indian Army there. In other words, the Indian Union was to use the same methods as the British to 'annex' Manipur. India, therefore, was not seen by the Meiteis to be different in any way from the British, and they perhaps did not want to be a 'colony' of India. The manner in which the state of Manipur was included in the Indian Union, whereby it was given only a peripheral status added to a feeling of alienation of these people from the country of which they were being made a part. Even after the merger with free India, the people of the state were not free to choose their own rulers. With the coming into force of the Constitution of India, Manipur became a 'Part C' state. The special feature of the Part C states was that they were administered by the President, through a Chief Commissioner or a Lieutenant-Governor, acting as his agent. Parliament had legislative power relating to any subject of the Part C states, but the Constitution empowered the Parliament to create a Legislature as well as a Council of Advisors or Ministers, for Part C states. In exercising this power, Parliament enacted the Government of Part C States Act, 1951, by which a Council of Advisors or Ministers was set up in each Part C state, to advise the Chief Commissioner, under the overall control of the President, and also a Legislative Assembly to function as the Legislature of the State, without derogation to the plenary powers of Parliament.[40] Manipur was thus virtually governed by the non-elected Chief Commissioner, the Council of Ministers being merely advisors to him. Similar administrative set-ups continued even after the States Reorganization Act, 1956 when Manipur became a Union Territory. It was only after the North-Eastern Areas (Reorganization) Act, 1971 that Manipur was granted statehood with a responsible government. It was only thereafter that the people of this state were able to directly choose their government.

Its rich language (Manipuri) was included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India only in 1993 after a prolonged and at times violent agitation. With the geographical barrier between Manipur and the rest of the country because of its mountainous terrain and with no sincere efforts made to bridge the communication gap with the mainland, the State remained and still is isolated from

[40] Basu Durga Das, *Commentary on the Constitution of India,* Vol. 4, 5th Edition, S.C. Sarkar & Sons (Private) Ltd., Calcutta 1968.

the rest of the country culturally and economically, fostering a sense of alienation amongst the people[41]. One can still observe the isolationist and apathetic attitude of the business and trading community which has come from outside the state, which does not interact socially and culturally with the local populace inspite of having stayed and settled in the state for decades. It is not very unusual to hear them using the word *desh* (homeland) to refer to their native place/village in Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan etc., thus connoting Manipur as *pardesh* (foreign country). Ethnically, linguistically and culturally, this part of the country is very different from mainland India. This has been the ideological and political basis for the underground movements in Manipur. Their demand is independence. They treat the Indian Union as an alien power that has taken over their territory just like another colonial power.

The era of British colonialism was seen in a similar perspective and so was the invasion of Hinduism and the subsequent merger with India. But, unlike the direct confrontationist attitude that had been directed against the British and the Indian Union, Hinduism in the course of time was adopted as part of their own culture, probably because Hinduism modified its tenets to incorporate the local ethnic elements to form a Meitei brand of Hinduism. It is therefore, recognized as part of the heritage of the society.

Studying cultural elements in terms of a process, therefore, gives us a complete understanding of the social phenomena in focus and relevance and relation for an understanding of present day structures as discussed here. Studying culture without its dynamic aspects is perhaps like studying the foetus without relating it to its growth process.

[41] There is no direct rail link with the rest of the country. Buses from Guwahati take about 20 hours to reach Imphal, subject to good weather conditions. The air link is irregular and costly beyond the reach of the common people.

8

Conclusion

Politics—Society—Cosmology

'... the deepest and most powerful message of cultural anthropology is that it reveals not only that certain kinds of activities can be analysed to reveal popular beliefs and preconceptions but that the whole of social life, from such symbolically elaborate practices as religious festivals to such seemingly matter-of-fact activities as building houses or raising crops, is culturally shaped'.[1]

There has been a growing interest among anthropologists in the historical approach and in combining this with the anthropological approach in studying beliefs and practices. Marshall Sahlins realized the importance of a combination of the two approaches while studying the Hawaiian Islands. According to him,

> there is no phenomenal ground—let alone any heuristic advantage—for considering history and structure as exclusive alternatives. Hawaiian history is throughout grounded in structure, the systematic ordering of contingent circumstances, even as the Hawaiian structure proved itself historical.[2]

History, viewed more as a process than merely as chronology, according to Dirks, is fundamental to such a method.[3] The study of culture necessitates the study of history, since a study of culture is, the study of the organization of current situations, in terms of the past. Its logic is that, ultimate answers to the prevalence of certain cultural categories lie in the past, beyond its cosmology—in its

[1] W. Sewell, *Work and Revolution in France,* quoted in N.B. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown,* Cambridge University Press, Bombay (1987), p. 12.

[2] M. Sahlins, *Islands of History,* Tavistock Publications London, 1985, pp. 143–4.

[3] N.B. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown,* Cambridge University Press, Bombay, 1987, p. 12.

origin. To follow this kind of an approach, makes it impossible to compartmentalize the subject of study.

The political edifice, social structure, the system of cultural values and the belief system had formed the basic pillars for understanding the state structure of Manipur. None of these features formed the *etic* or the *emic*, or were placed in a hierarchy of the 'base' versus the 'super structure'. Instead, an attempt was made at understanding all these features, while placing them on the same plane, for an analysis of Manipuri society as a whole.

Seeking the origin of all these factors and reformulating the cultural constructs was only the first step in my endeavour towards understanding this society. The next step was to study their present relevance and form, and the kinds of actions and behaviour through which these features were getting manifested. I tried to decipher these actions, feelings, and responses. I tried to understand the Meiteis' distinct behaviourial responses. My central questions included: Where does the essence of their belief system lie? What makes their rituals and their social actions so performative and detailed? I was able to answer such questions and many more by turning to my fieldwork notebooks, again and again. But most of the time, that was not enough. To get answers to the 'why'(s) I used to go to my field areas and simply sit through and observe ongoing ceremonies, or rituals, or the celebrations of a festival. Sometimes, I would go to an old person and start conversing with him generally about his beliefs and his perceptions. Only after such attempts to get familiar with the thought process of ordinary people and the scholars alike, was I able to really understand such elements. The analysis was based on insights about the mystical basis of Meitei beliefs as also on the nature of the administrative set-up, and the kinds of interactions that take place within a family. I was not able to ignore any aspect no matter how diverse, or how trivial it apparantly seemed since all these reflected in diverse ways the essential characteristics of the composite culture of this society. Having completed such an analysis, I then processed to study the relevance and continuity of certain cultural constructs in contemporary Manipuri society and its newly emerging manifestations. This part of my study required very sensitive handling. While studying this aspect I was mainly interested in the ideas underlining the newly emerging power groups, the revolutionary groups. None of my respondents felt comfortable answering my queries relating to this aspect. It was then, that I realized the

importance of non-verbal communication. In their silence, from the signs and expressions they gave I was able to gather voluminous information. The most predominant feature of which was a feeling of awe, and of confusion. There were many issues around which they seemed to be aligned with such groups. At the same time there were some questions with which they did not want to get involved. The older generation lamented the erosion of societal values and the prevalence of corruption which they hoped would be prevented with the emergence of the new power groups.

On political issues in general, there was a great deal of ambiguity. While adopting the new democratic values, the Meiteis still had strong attachments to their traditional values. They paid obeisance to their king's sons and their families as per their tradition. The MKs and RKs are still accorded special privilege and respect on all social occasions. This kind of ambiguity in the structure of political beliefs could be the result of parallel streams of incompatible values and institutions. The imposition of new political structures had not supplanted the old ones. Different kinds of political set-ups were introduced as a result of historical changes, however the images of the past in the form of rituals and belief systems continued to exist as an ongoing process along with these systems.

The disintegration of kingship occurred with this institution becoming an arena for conflicts among the sons of the king vying for the throne. Until then, kingship had been thought to belong to the realm of the divine and the king was enthroned with blessings from the ancestors, while also taking into account his personal achievements. This institution got weaker with the conquest by the British and the reduction of the king to a mere figurehead. The rule of primogeniture was established and it became the right of the eldest son of the king to take over kingship from his father. Kingship that used to be 'achieved' became an ascribed status. Whatever little political power was left with the king after these transitions also slipped from his hand when Manipur merged with India. Control over administration came under the supervision of the representative of the Central Government and bureaucrats recruited from outside Manipur. This gave rise to resentment among the local people and it sowed the seeds for the emergence of new power groups on the scene.

This historical process did not come about through any clear cut stages. The elements of kingship remained present at every stage.

This was observable from the behaviour of the people. Kingship remained very much alive in the people's mind. They addressed the descendants of their king with special honorific titles, gave them a seat of precedence on all collective occasions, and presented themselves in such a manner that they seemed like 'subjects' acknowledging the superiority of the royalty.

Apart from such visible responses there were also certain subtle codes implicit in their belief systems, which asserted their faith in their traditional system. Their veneration of their original ruler, Pakhangba, and his mythical brother, Sanamahi, who was their household deity was present during every ritual, reaffirming their faith in them. The state structure for the Meiteis was never thought to be something apart from their beliefs. Their belief system encompassed the state structure, as well as the social and family structures, as also the microcosm of the entire social system—the individual human being. The principle underlining the generation of a human being was thought to be the principle of generation of the whole society, and the principle of generation of the state structure. The symbolic enactment of the copulation of the male and female principle was an essential ritual for any occasion: Whether it was during a coronation or ceremony, when remembering Meiteis' origins during the Laiharaoba festivals, or the placing of silver and gold coins as representations of the male and female principles in the foundation laying ceremony for the erection of the first pillar (*Jatra*) at the beginning of the process of building a house. It was this fertility principle which formed the basis of the belief system. The ritual enactments based on this belief carried elements of the past into the world of the present.

This was also expressed in the clear distinction and segregation of males and females in social congregations. Their seats were prescribed on the right and the left sides respectively and these positions were maintained during the rituals of birth, of marriage and of death, in the placement of rooms in the house structure, and even in the sleeping arrangements of a husband and wife. The reason for this was that since the male and female were the two basic principles of Meitei thought, they had to be specially defined, and specifically stated. It was in the difference of these two principles and their opposition to each other that the basis for the emergence and existence of this society was formed.

The principle of fertility had a cosmic base. The copulation of the supreme *Pa* and *Pi* had given birth to the Meitei social structure.

The seven salais which earlier had had an independent existence came into the Meitei fold with all of them tracing their descent from common parents—*Atingkok* (Father Void) and *Taopiloini* (The Supreme Mother). All the salais then were perceived in relation to the mythical King Pakhangba, so much so, that their political, social as well as cosmic status began to be seen in relation to this mythical ancestor of the Ningthoujas. In fact the cosmic personalities were so much present in the social structure, that the Meitei society was perceived not only as that of its living members, but also as that of its ancestors. The ancestors, the gods, and the goddesses together with the living human beings constituted the complete Meitei social structure. The Meiteis were thought to be deeply rooted in their ancestral traditions. This is a perception of Meitei society that holds true even today. Even the young, educated generation of today are conscious of the status of their respective ancestors and expect others to behave in accordance with the status ascribed to their ancestors. That is why going back to the past was thought to be relevant to analyse the present.

Besides the belief system, the observation of rituals was important to understand the juxtaposition of all the three features together—politics, society, and cosmology of the Meitei structure. Lai-haraoba, was the best example as a holistic expression but other festivals like Yaoshang, Cheiraoba, Kang Jatra, and Heikru Hindongba also showed similar kinds of juxtaposition. The gods, ancestors, the king, and the people participated collectively in these festivals. The ancestors who were an integral part of the cosmos were believed to the present even during household rituals and at every stage of rites of passage rituals. No ritual, whether state or private, was complete without inviting the ancestors to join and give their blessings to the congregation or the individual for whom the rite was being performed. In fact every individual body was believed to be the embodiment of the cosmos, and the topography of the state structure was created akin to the human body.

With such a deeply ingrained belief system where every part of the human body and the state was considered to be the abode of gods, it is no wonder that the conversion to Hinduism did not erase the already existing faith. In fact, inspite of state patronage, Hinduism, in order to establish itself in this society, had to accept the prevalent ethnic elements and modify itself to such an extent, that it became a 'Meitei brand of Hinduism'.

The various claims made by sociologists in their theories on Hinduism in India, do not cover the form of Hinduism practiced in

Manipur. The theoretical paradigm underling *Homo-Hierarchicus*[4] fails to establish its universal applicability in the light of the structure of Manipuri Hinduism.

In fact Manipuri Hinduism should be studied in greater detail to throw more light on the extent to which a religion can undergo reformulations and remodelling in order to be accepted in a new social setting. It was one of the rare occasions in the history of Hinduism where it succeeded in bringing about mass conversion. A deeper understanding of this could bring out some more useful insights, which would make Dumont's *Homo-Hierarchicus* obsolete. It was a Hinduism with no caste-system, no concept of ingrained purity—impurity and no ascribed division of labour. We have yet to come across a sociological study of Hinduism where these categories do not form part of any analysis.

One of the reasons for the unusual form taken on by Hinduism in Meitei society is that its people continued to believe in their own faith, and take pride in their roots. Even today this pride can be seen embodied in collective activities. The worship of the household goddess Laisana, marks the beginning of any collective mass protest. Sanamahi is worshipped before the beginning of a journey or before examinations for good luck. The auspiciousness and inauspiciousness of dates and days for any activity is still followed according to traditional Meitei beliefs. And recognition and reverence of the royal strata continues and is marked by the adherence to prescribed etiquettes and by the way they are addressed with honorific titles.

Sahlins propounded a similar proposition while studying the Hawaiian Islands. According to him,

> ... the transformation of culture is a mode of its reproduction. ... The specific condition of European contact gave rise to forms of opposition between chiefs and people that were not envisioned in the traditional relations between them ... the cultural categories acquire new functional values.[5]

Proposing its general validity he says that,

> ... Hawaiian history is surely not unique in the demonstration that culture functions as a *synthesis* of stability and change, past and present, diachrony and synchrony.[6]

[4] Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications,* Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1980.

[5] M. Sahlins, *Islands of History,* Tavistok Publications, New York 1985, p. 138.

[6] Ibid., p. 144.

Emphasizing the importance of understanding cultural categories of the past, he cites an example from the current events of the Islanders.

> ... When Hawaiian women began to live and eat with the crews aboard Cook's or Vancouver's ships, serious doubts were cast on the foreigner's divinity. Now there is nothing in the act of eating with women that is inherently ungodly—except that in the Hawaiian system it is polluting of men and destroys their taboo. Events thus cannot be understood apart from the values attributed to them: it transforms a mere happening into a fateful conjuncture.[7]

Elements from the history of Manipur society have also been repeated and reformulated in the ever evolving cultural categories. Instead of becoming a part of archival records, these elements have been proven to be as relevant even today. That is why it was necessary for me to gain anthropological and historical insights in order to get to a sociological understanding of this society. History is not only confined to the past but forms part of the present too, expressed through cultural constructs.

Politics, society, and cosmology, then, together constitute a composite structure. Along with being a structure, these categories are also seen as processes. We have also shown how these categories are powerful factors that need to be kept in mind while studying and interpreting the social structure and its polity. They function as the basic layer of cement on which rest the belief system and the structure of attitudes in its dynamic aspects even while they maintain their basic tenets and identity.

The concept of a 'theatre state', immediately creates an impression for those unfamiliar with it, that it must not be a serious study of the state structure. Terms like ceremony, pomp, splendour, etc., which constitute the main body of the description here, do not usually come in the sphere of the term discribing the functioning of a state. It is precisely the uniqueness of his description that made Clifford Geertz a pioneer in anthropological studies of the state structure. His approach provided the culturalists with a new area of study which was until then considered to be strictly within the sphere of politics.

The theatre state concept was introduced by Geertz to make it possible to see that the state need not always be discussed in terms of governance and authority. It has another very important

[7] Ibid., p. 154.

characteristic, namely the status that is assigned to it and the element of splendour that exemplifies it.

The history of Bali, according to Geertz, did not point toward tyranny, toward concentration of power or toward government, but instead pointed toward spectacle, ceremony, toward public dramatizations, of the major obsessions of Balinese culture. The ritual life of the court was not merely reflective of the social order but also of the supernatural order. Court ceremonialism was not a means to an end but was an end in itself. Geertz cites an example of a stupendously arranged cremation of a king to present the emphasis laid on spectacle, splendour, and ceremony. He states that the body of the king was burned with great pomp, with three of his concubines sacrificing themselves to the flames. The Balinese went to attend in festive attire. 'It was a great day for the Balinese. It was some years since they had the chance of witnessing one of these awful spectacles, a spectacle that meant for them a holiday with an odour of sanity about it ....'[8]

The ceremonial life of Negara constituted an assertion of spiritual power, and leaping alive into the flames. Royal suicides, were only a few of the examples of this assertion. He further states that 'State cult was not a cult of the state: It was an argument made over and over again in the insistent vocabulary of ritual, that worldly status has a cosmic base, that hierarchy is the governing principle of the universe and that the arrangements of human life are but approximations, more close or less to the divine.'[9]

Geertz referred to state ceremonials as metaphysical theatre. To understand such phenomena, according to him, neither traditional ethnography involving description of objects and behaviour, nor traditional iconography involving tracing of stylistic motifs, and nor traditional philosophy involving dissection of textual meaning were enough on their own. Rather all the three had to converge in such a way that the faith enclosed within the enacted theatre was expressed in a concrete way.

Ceremony and spectacle, in the form of glittering costumes, elaborate processions, loud beat of drums and other musical instruments, were the elements I witnessed almost immediately when I reached the area. Whether it was public festivity or an individuals rite of passage, these occasions were predominantly marked by

[8] C. Geertz, *Negara,* Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1980, p. 98.
[9] Ibid., p. 102.

detailed and often pompous rituals with ceremonial attire. These dominated the whole cultural scenario and therefore did not need to probe into the subtleties of the lifestyles of the people and their societal actions to realize this. The celebration of festivals and the *Sankirtans* (religious songs sung by a professional group in a congregation) were the ever present, cultural elements of the state structure which showed the signs of a theatre. Studying the elements of the past though texts and through people's recollection of the past led us to further confirm our view that Manipur was predominantly a theatre state.

Images of this are present even today, with the people's perception of their state capital Kangla, which continues to be perceived as a life giving source, of primal energy, and is symbolized as the benefactor of the whole society. The ritual of coronation, the last of which was held in 1941, used to be most elaborate and extravagant and could not be merely thought of as an act of accession to the throne. It was not a simple act, but involved the paraphernalia of the whole society. The priests (*Maibas*) and priestesses (*Maibis*) were the directors of the whole theatrical exercise and the crown prince was the main actor. He had to perform every act with perfection, which involved a show of might as well as the successful completion of his copulation with the queen. The people of each sagei had their assigned roles in this series of acts.

In fact the entire society used to revolve around a series of detailed rituals, which were marked by equally detailed and prescribed costumes. Phaneks with specific colours were worn by women on specific occasions. Even day to day routine behaviour was according to prescribed ritual codes, called Niyam/Chatnabi. Every house was constructed by making each part of it correspond to parts of the human body. The human body was believed to be the abode of divine beings. By making the house analogous to the parts of human beings, it was also perceived to be the epitome of the whole cosmos. Every action inside the house, then related to the divine, and hence could not be mere mundane acts, but acts of reverence and worship, which were conducted through a series of rituals.

Certain things must be clarified before concluding. When I say 'king as a ritual head' or 'ceremony being more important than the mere acts of politics' or that 'Manipur is a theatre state', I am by no means trying to categorize the state structure of Manipur as a primitive unspecialized agency filled with dramatical elements, with no link to power, politics and governance—a typical 'Indic state'

following western typification. Instead, what I have tried to show is that the kind of rituals and the ceremonies displayed in this state were at no point mere rituals, but 'inescapable determinants' of power and politics for the office of governance. The king's might, his deep insight about the relations of the Meitei kingdom with the outside world, the elaborate structure of nobility, and their codes of conduct as prescribed by the priests could by no means be under-estimated in my analysis of this theatre state. The king was a ritual head no doubt, but 'ritual' not in the sense of mere decoration. The rituals of which he was the head were powerful elements that played an important role in the control of the state and its people. They were not 'mere rituals', but were 'the rituals' which entailed power and were therefore extremely strong elements in determining the ruler, the administration, and the people. So were the dress codes, the use of colour, the kind of umbrellas, and the forms of address. They all were symbolic representations of the extent of power that one had. Hence, the power element could not be ignored. What I have tried to emphasize is that power when seen from the perspective of ritual paraphernalia, myths, legends, and theatrical exercises, of a society which is pregnant with such elements, can provide a deep insight into the reasons behind the functioning of its state structure. These elements do form an essential criteria in studying power relations and cannot be confined to the field of mythology and folklore.

Dirks in his book, *The Hollow Crown*, seems to have missed the point about the model of a theatre state. He has stated that with the British conquest, the king became a 'mere ritual head', and it was then that the crown became actually hollow. What is implied is that the state of Puddukkotai now in the state of Tamil Nadu had been a complete system of governance but when the British divested the king of his power, he became just a ritual head without any power. Thereafter, the state apparatus of the king became just a theatrical exercise. This is not what Geertz had in mind when he propounded this theory. He never said that the theatre state concept can be applied only where the power element has been drained out making the crown 'hollow' rendering the ritual element as mere decoration. Instead, what he implied was that power in such societies emanates from the ritual aspect. That is why the ritual element is important in studying political structures.

Approaching this topic from a culturalist point of view and adopting the model of Clifford Geertz did not satisfy the requirements of my study. The problem mainly lay in methodology. Clifford Geertz

does not specify and emphasize the interaction with people since he aimed at studying cultures as texts. This approach lost its relevance for my purpose at that juncture. I wanted to go further and link culture and the past of the society to its present. My main aim was to make this study relevant by analysing the new problems emerging in Manipur and the consequent changes in the state apparatus, as well as the changing perceptions of the concept of state in people's minds.

Researchers of our generation have to be very cautious in studying various societies. Times have changed since scholars like Evans Pritchard, Malinowski, Meyer Fortes *et al.* studied 'primitive' societies. Now-a-days the respondents could be as educated and as aware as the researcher. Education has spread far and wide and there are now hardly any societies which are totally untouched by the influence of the outside world. The respondents can now respond in an informed manner. Though, as Geertz has also said, '... all ethnographical descriptions are home made, that they are the describer's descriptions, not those of the described,'[10] the descriptions have to be based on more solid ground and can not be mere personal interpretations. The ethnographer, in other words, has to be much more accountable.

In the colonial period, as stated by Jain, the anthropologists visited, operated upon and articulated the cultures of the 'natives' for a coterie consisting of the anthropological fraternity and an elite leadership in the metropolis and some, in the peripheries. '... the "savage" did not hit back.'[11]

In post-colonial times, especially in our times, the anthropologists have become much more conscious. They are constantly doing away with the rigidities of old theories which used to blind them from a total view of social reality. Instead they are endeavouring to conceptualize the elements of society under study with sensitivity and respect for their values.

I hope that I have been able to bring out the totality of politics, society, and cosmology of this state in terms of the codes of social research as set out above, as well as with respect and sensitivity to the sentiments of the people of this state.

[10] C. Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1988, p. 145.

[11] R.K. Jain 'The Dialogue: Its Nature and Problematic', *Seminar*, March 1992, p. 4.

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